

## **Words on Artistic Research**

### **Why?**

The aim of this text is to introduce a way of relating to artistic work and to the concept of method as a tool for what is developed in artistic practice, i.e. the working process of the artist and the formation of theory, which arises out of artistic practice as well as insight into the concept of artistic research.

I want to stimulate motivation, pleasure and expectation in relation to the art of dance, to reflect on art as a concept at work in our society and in our contemporary culture,

In parts, I do quote myself from my books *Dance For Better, For Worse* (2004) and *Movement As The Memory Of The Body* (2006).

### **Words on Dance**

As artists we are continually engaged in reshaping so-called reality, creating it anew, so that it corresponds better to our own desires, our own needs. What we have to make happen is what would otherwise not occur, we have to create the images that would otherwise not be seen, make space for what would otherwise not find room. In dance the kind of knowledge that is not considered acceptable elsewhere becomes important. Our physical memories emerge as events of significance. It is our version, our interpretation that is reflected in the work of art.

What is it that makes us believe that we know anything?

In what we call reality, we stumble between strange states and events. Moments follow one another in a long unbroken succession. High and low, long and short, fast and slow, clamorous and silent. Composition is a means of bringing order to chaos and creating meaning from all the tumbling fragments, irrespective of genre and style. Choreography creates new contexts out of what is old and familiar, or old and unknown.

Working with movement until it can convey its own expression and honesty is a process, which, of necessity, has to expose the ego and make use of it. It is an inevitably personal journey through mind, body and feeling - in which questioning plays a vital part.

It is difficult to realise that for many people significance is only assigned to that which fulfils some obvious function. Art becomes aesthetics, entertainment, and form as a result... Function becomes synonymous with meaning, or with what can be explained. What do we mean by "function" and by words like "meaning"? Form is the foundation for everything that creates meaning. Composition is a means of creating form.

What is it that arouses our expectations of the work?

Everyday life is saturated with images of various kinds. The encounter with dance takes place in a timeless interval. You leave behind everything that has been and return to what will be. In-between is the moment we are going to share without any pre-existing ideas to divide us.

Seeing the everyday as the very essence of life is a challenge. To see the moments follow one another in a succession of possibilities. What is real? There is space in the everyday for all the peculiarities, and much of the mystery, life has to offer. Secret rooms open up with new insights, and an unexpected meeting can suddenly provide exactly what was needed to make progress with an idea or something that has not yet been articulated. I take what I have experienced - together with my expectations - into that space where anything can happen. It is not enough to graze in the fields or to be foddered in the stall. The hours in the studio become the break that is needed if the process is to move forward.

In dance there is space for dreams and desires, for recognition and questioning, for the construction of identity and affirmation of the self. Time dissolves in the moment that is danced. Dance takes shape in the space between what was and what will be. It is there, in the space in-between, that everything takes place and new insights are created. This is why we should insist on the place of dance as a fundamental aspect of our own everyday world and that of others.

We all stage our own lives. Our role in this is to compose the bit of life we have not yet lived. To create the images we have not yet seen. To put these images in relation to the world around us and provide a new context for the familiar codes. It is ourselves we make use of.

In order to make use of ourselves, we need to have an active self-image. Who am I? In the world of the stage we can put this self-image to work, change it, develop it, rip it apart and create a whole new one out of the remnants. Choreography involves researching, analysing and using the tools required for this construction. Doing the unexpected. Daring to put what you do not yet know to the test. Dance provides us with an opportunity for the discovery and acquisition of a self-image while also making possible the search for what we are not, for what calls our self-image into question. We are searching for what we lack.

This is how we incorporate ourselves into our own minds and create our own truths. We see what we want to see and hear what we want to hear. We forget what no longer wants to be remembered. In this way we reshape our existence – we recreate the world. Choreography puts together contexts out of movement in time and space. We compose our different fragments to form new meanings, offering others the chance to encounter them.

All of us create conceptions of one thing and another. What you see is not what your neighbour sees. It is our individual memories and experience that serve as tools for understanding and interpretation. Meaning. This is true irrespective of whether the encounter is between us here and now, or with a stage performance.

### **The working method**

All movement can be made use of in dance. As an artist I am the one who decides how – which defines the way I work, my method. The method is changeable and evolves during the course of the work. Other components of the work such as lighting, music, staging etc. are independent forms of expression, which have to be combined into a functioning whole on the basis of the method chosen. Convention offers models for everything, but as the originator of the work I am the one who decides. Each decision is significant.

That part of the work that confronts us with various choices and decisions is ultimately what determines whether the work can be considered to be an individual effort. This does not mean that we are expected to “invent” something no one else has ever done but that we have the capacity to compose something on the basis of an authentically subjective intention and idea. We get use of our creativity. All movements, all sounds, all lighting effects, all colours, smells, tastes have already been used.

The role of the artist is to put creative processes into a context where the goal is not given in advance, where risk-taking is a vital ingredient and where the insight and knowledge generated by the process are just as much the goal as the “end product” – the work. The process, as a goal, involves focusing on the knowledge-generative aspect. The insights that have been acquired are meant to be reflected in the work. The work is that which presents the process, that which the audience encounters, that which is subject to criticism in a variety of forms.

The artist’s attitude is one of critical questioning and makes use of an investigative perspective. The audience, from the other pole of the process, have an active role to play in terms of the concept, working methods, instruments, instruction... all the things that go to make up a process. As a member of the audience, you are invited to make use of your creative capacity in relation to experience, context, cause and effect.

We ask questions and, in doing so, we create space for that which needs to be presented in symbolic rather than in realistic terms. The power, the energy in what we call an idea is astonishing. This is the energy that makes us work, think and put our minds and bodies body to the rack. An idea can change everything and make us doubt everything we previously believed we knew. A strange and inexplicable power.

We work with embodied experience. We acquire our skills by “doing”. This bodily, practical foundation of knowledge and skills can then be developed from the perspective of theory – but it is the practical dimension of the project in particular that generates insight and understanding and provides the work with its content. The art of dance constitutes a field in which our need for both emotional and intellectual stimulus can be given free rein. Anything and everything can happen. Dance as space for that which would otherwise not be said, as that which can heighten the present moment while also allowing us to look ahead. Dance as that which can get us to think the thoughts we would otherwise not have thought.

The work produced by artists has always fascinated people and brought them pleasure, horrified or provoked them. There has been a lot of research carried out on visual artists, composers, poets, choreographers, dancers etc. and this has provided us with a certain kind of knowledge. But the knowledge that is generated by the artistic process (the path that leads to the finished work) can only be extracted by the artists themselves. This is our particular responsibility. We “make” and new insights are gained from this “making”, which can be articulated for the enlightenment of the outside world. What we acquire in terms of new knowledge is made available to others.

The particular methodology of the artistic process is also a valuable source of knowledge for the outside world. What we can contribute with our work are a great many insights into wordless communication, the development of linguistic concepts, aesthetics, spatial representation and much else besides that can help clarify and illuminate human beings in a social, political, philosophical or purely physical context.

I wonder what it is that stimulates your expectations of the work?

## **Artistic Research**

What is the creative moment? Scientists who study the brain measure its activity in the course of carrying out various actions. A psychiatrist told me that the creative moment resembled a state of hypnosis. Would this therefore be a scientific explanation of the heightened sense of the present we often refer to as the stage moment? But to whom would this apply? Desirable for me as artist, of course, but is it something that can also be discerned by you, the members of the audience?

The way I see it, these questions are examples of research into art - from a “scientific” perspective. In order to turn this issue into an example of artistic research, the artist would have to carry out his or her own explorations into this moment on the basis of the artist’s particular ways of working. How could this be documented? How should the findings be presented? Genre-specifically I say defended by the artists themselves. But then what would distinguish the presentation of the findings from a “normal” performance/work? What would distinguish this process from a “normal” artistic process (if there is any such thing as a “normal” one)?

When I take part in various international research conferences, I discover that what is going on under the heading of “artistic research” is primarily the application of “scientific” perspectives to artistic works. This research takes place from without rather than from within.

Research can be a path to greater knowledge about what we want to find out. To gain acceptance for the more extensive process research requires, we have to be able to present an idea, a hypothesis, concerning the project and its definition. We also need to be able to describe the value of the work. What can we expect?

The need for more developed working processes that are not aimed primarily at production but at achieving other artistic ends is becoming increasingly compelling. We want to know more. Not just what we need to know to make our ideas a reality, but also what they actually are. We choose a space for our work based on our beliefs as to what will be most favourable for it. This means that our stage may be the traditional one, or something very different to the theatre and the established dance stage. The more extensive work process offered by a research perspective also demands a clarification of the notion of what a location, a space, is. The many conventions established by tradition in my field of artistic endeavour very often work to its detriment. We want to move freely among the possibilities life offers.

Almost all portrayals of artistic work start from looking at the work from without rather than from within. Oversimplified generalisations often based on mystical notions of artists and their work. By way of example, a common assertion is that from the very beginning of the process the goal is the finished work and that the work carried out by the artist evolves from what the artist wants to say with the finished work, what he or she wants to communicate to the viewer. This is very frequently not the case. This assertion is based on a conventional notion of traditional artistic creativity derived from classical works. Contemporary artists usually work from quite different perspectives in which the notion of the working process itself is of primary importance and what comes to be expressed in the finished product evolves during the course of the working process.

By convention, artistic research was supposed to be referred to as artistic development work. This is changing now and the concept of artistic research is being increasingly used (the term

“artistic development work” may be used to refer to something other than research and may still be usefully applied to developmental efforts). The sciences have had a monopoly on the concept and a stranglehold on the way it is defined. Considerable value is often assigned to research in the various scientific disciplines, while artistic research is all but unknown to most people. The concept of artistic work is more familiar although not particularly esteemed in our culture with the exception of those active in the arts that produce work that can be capitalised on.

The business of producing “product” has also taken on central importance in the management of cultural policy, as, for example, in the guidelines for grant making. The quantitative aspects overshadow the qualitative, and this has an impact on the evaluation of artistic achievements. In order to demonstrate the need not just for more advanced grant structures and a more engaged cultural policy but also for artistic research, we have to make visible knowledge that has already been acquired through artistic work while also creating new forms of understanding capable of legitimising the values we want to defend in relation to the work we make. Research can make this possible.

The artist who works creatively by calling into question traditional forms and accepted practice is working from an exploratory, an investigative, research perspective. The artist who works within established traditions and practice may be prominent in artistic terms without making use of a research perspective. It is our own attitudes to the work and its aims that determine how it should be defined. I may well think “labelling” is uninteresting, but I realise nonetheless that a definition will be required of us as to how we see our own work and its place in the cultural context. It is quite simply essential to develop definitions and evaluative criteria in order to be able to influence the distribution of financial resources, for example, on the basis of the expected outcome and the artist’s ability. The money it costs to make working possible is money we have not yet got.

You have to make a commitment to own motivation and vision for the work you are representing in and through your art. This requires both self-confidence and a measure of self-understanding if you are not to get trapped in hierarchical conventions and issues of prestige. You can become a prominent dancer and choreographer without deciding to become an artist. It is the goals you set in what you do that determine the outcome. Why you do what you do. Being an artist has not to do with skill. It is more a matter of ideology and philosophy. Many of the dancers I have met do not want to take on the role of the artist. It requires a degree of exploration and risk-taking that many people choose to avoid in favour of other values.

The artist is often solitary. We are used to working alone, to being vulnerable and exposed. Experience has taught me that what I need in my desire for more extensive, more profound working processes is the presence of others, their insights and thoughts about what is going on. Collaboration with other artists and researchers generates much that is positive as well as a great deal of confusion and resistance. All the things that force me to strive for greater clarity in what I want to achieve.

Many artists use an investigative and exploratory outlook. Developing this as part of the working process so as to turn it into a research project imposes limitations. We formulate the question in hand in such a way as to define the limits of the project, to document the process and make accessible what we have gained in terms of new insights, doubts and rediscoveries. This is vital according to my way of defining the difference between an “ordinary” process of

discovery and a research project. All the insights that are generated by the process should be made accessible for other artists to relate to.

Scientific research is presented in what we refer to as documentation, while artistic research is demonstrated in the work of art. The work is the primary expression of the understanding that has been gained and is accompanied by some kind of documentation, usually in textual form. The work of art is interpreted subjectively, whereas it is generally assumed that a text is interpreted objectively. It could be said that art establishes a new reality, whereas the sciences provide a more detailed picture of the one we already have.

Artistic research often involves work with processes that resemble those of the scientific researcher. The more I learn about contemporary scientific research, the clearer it becomes that, in terms of methodology, the similarities are more numerous than the differences. However, there is one crucial distinction. Artistic research is based on individual expression and subjective experience. A touch simplistic, perhaps, but a useful means of distinguishing the two. An artistic research project has to be documented and defended by the artist. No one else can do it.

Research into dance can contribute insights into what it is that is knowledge-generative in an artistic process. It also helps us to discover more about what an idea is, about courage and cowardice, about human strengths and shortcomings... Artistic research in dance is based on embodied experience and individual expression. I like to consider artistic research as a form of fundamental linguistic research. By linguistic I do not mean something word-based but rather that which - from its basis in movement, gesture, mime and relationally to time and space - can develop our perceptive and communicative capacities. Through dance our entire concept of language, our communicative resources, can be developed and enriched. Once again - Look around you. What is it that makes you think you know anything?

Artistic research into dance is also vital in terms of widening our knowledge of and about dance as an art form, in order to acquire more refined analytical models, improve our historical awareness as well as raise the status of the art form.

### **To sum up...**

Artistic research is a process of investigation and study aimed at acquiring knowledge and understanding of what it is artists seek in the creative process. The finished work presents the outcome of this process and the insight acquired is located as a result in a social environment in which others can criticise and make use of what has been achieved - through documentation and reflection on the work itself. The work becomes the product that exemplifies the working process of the artist.

Artists select their ways of working, their attitudes, aesthetic standpoints, etc. based on their motivation, vision and the methods devised to make their working processes or the creation of the finished work visible. The efforts of the artist are presented in what he or she chooses as the means for the presentation of the work. The artist who chooses to do research into his or her art must also present an accounting of the process and the work on the basis of the relevant issue or question. The content of the research work, the reflections it gives rise to and the conclusions drawn should be made available in part through the resulting work of art, in part through documentation, which can make the insights and experience, gained accessible to

other artists. This becomes complicated with respect to dance, in that the dance itself has to be documented in a way that corresponds to the artistic outcome. This has to remain in existence once the performance is over.

A great deal of interesting research about and for art is being carried out – the academic world is the forum for this kind of research, frequently under the aegis of a university. Currently there is no scope for artistic research in dance at all. Our arts colleges have no research departments of their own, no postgraduate institutes and within the Swedish Research Council we have to do battle with the humanities and other fields, where we often end up getting short shrift, since we do not apply scientific method and practice as part of artistic research.

A body of theoretical thought different to that of the sciences is being developed out of artistic practice and the idea of documentation is acquiring a new definition through the work of art. The existence of two fully independent partners is necessary if a real exchange is to come about between art and science. Developing artistic research in art can help make this a reality.

Artistic research is still a new idea. The sciences have been developing methodologies, theory and praxis for millennia. Art has a history of its own. In our present age, art serves a different function than it did a hundred years ago and that function is also changing as society evolves. Which is why we should look to the future. Contemporary society is created against a historical background. Creative art and research can help carry us forward. Something comes into being because it once was.

Only the artist can carry out artistic research. We investigate our own processes. The scientific researcher explores around his or hers. No predetermined methodology is available to the artist and there are no rewards in the form of titles and advancement. We have to find our own methods, the paths best suited to our goals. A heady and exciting challenge! Much is demanded of those of us who maintain that artistic development work is research. Creating understanding and acceptance for a different form of knowledge than the scientific is among the most difficult tasks we face. Making comprehensible that which cannot be structured in words. Changing the description of reality. Bringing to reality what can make it even more remarkable and thrilling to be a part of...

Artistic research is generating new forms of knowledge about the creative portrayal of human beings!