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Exploring the Sense and Meaning in Dance

In this article I will present some of the dance ontological themes I explored in my research and artistic dissertation (2004).¹ In it I wanted to question the fundamentals that underlie our way of thinking about dance art. I wanted to explore what kind of different notions on art, truth and bodily being contemporary dance in many of its forms represents. To be able to deal with these questions I found that my practical experience as professional dance artist was not enough but that I had to also dig deep into the cognitive history of western art and bodily existence. The horizon for this investigation couldn't be only the art of dance or dance as a separate aesthetic field. Wider perspectives of bodily being-in-the-world and the philosophical knowledge of it were needed. Therefore I based my dance-ontological questioning on *fundamental ontology*, foremost in the thinking of Martin Heidegger.² My own research interest was at first mainly focused on the new orientations of dance, which stem from the 1960s and 1970s, but in order to reveal the "new", the "old" perspectives have to be articulated as well. In this case, the "old" refers to the tradition of idealistic aesthetics and its manifestations on dance history. In the following, I bring forth some of the notions that underlie our Western conceptions of truth and reality; the metaphysical thinking that, according to Heidegger, our tradition of aesthetics is historically based on. Subsequently, I explore how the philosophy of existence in the 1900s has affected the emerging of the new paradigmatic orientations in dance of the 20th century.

About art, truth and aesthetics in the history of Western thought

The first part of my research is a dive into the thinking of Martin Heidegger.³ In it I present his interpretation of the intertwining of metaphysics and aesthetics and discuss his proposal for an un-aesthetic mode of viewing art. Heidegger attempts to bring forth a new way of thinking about art in which it is not only considered to be a matter of aesthetic experience but also understood in relation to a disclosure of truth. In Heidegger's analysis this notion is closely affiliated with the conception of the nature of truth in Western thought. Heidegger

asks how metaphysics has pushed us to encounter reality, and he answers that it has done so in such a way that our involvement in the mutual ground of Being has been forgotten.

Heidegger argues that the tradition of aesthetics relies upon platonic metaphysics in which reality is revealed to us through the distinction between the supra-sensible (ideal) and sensible (material) realms. The truth is found from the supra-sensible realm of permanent ideas, from which sensible matter is only a shadow. This is the metaphysical ground which continued to inform the conceptual model of artworks throughout western history: an artwork is formed matter which allows the supra-sensible to shine through it; an artwork imitates reality, which is revealed through conception of the right idea; an artwork is a symbol, an allegory, a metaphor, a representation. (Heidegger 1991, 15-16, 24-26; Luoto 2002, 45-47)

Heidegger unravels this basically mimetic way of understanding art while he simultaneously rethinks the history of Western metaphysics. Heidegger does not approach art as a vehicle for representing the contents of the supra-sensible but considers it a prime opening-up of a world or a disclosure of reality. With this position the Greek term *techne* becomes important to him. *Techne* denotes a human mode of knowing through which human beings draw *phusis* (being, the prevalent) to disclose a world – a significant and meaningful circuit of openness. (Heidegger 1991, 62)

Heidegger believes art to be this kind of erecting of a world and a field of disclosure of a new reality, which does not concern the truth of beings but the unconcealedness of being's "beingness". The unconcealedness of being can never be the mere conceiving of the right idea, never sheer disclosedness. It involves the fathomless concealment, the secretive withdrawal of the not-yet-uncovered. What metaphysics has forgotten, according to Heidegger, is the opening of reality as a disclosure, which contains that from which it occurs – the undisclosed. (Heidegger 1991, 55-57)

Since Heidegger thinks of art as this kind of a place for the happening of prime unconcealedness, he also emphasizes that an artwork is not a representation of something previously disclosed. It is only in the artwork itself that what at the moment comes-to-present springs forth. An artwork does not imitate reality. Instead, the figure, the *Gestalt*, of the artwork with its earth-world structure wrests and brings forth the happening of the disclosedness of being set-into-work in the work itself.

If the essence of art and the ontology of an artwork were to be seen in this way, it means also that an artwork could be seen as neither a plain aesthetic object nor a sheer initiator of aesthetic experience. Rather, it offers for the community of peoples a possibility to participate

in the unconcealedness of being and disclosure of the world which is taking place in the artwork. (Heidegger 1991, 65-66, 71, 75-76; Luoto 2002, 190-197)

About the paradigm of dance aesthetics

In the second part of my thesis I examine and analyze the kinds of preconceptions aesthetics has offered dance art as well as the kinds of preconceptions "the metaphysics of subjectivity" has offered for the understanding of bodily being.⁴ I illuminate how within the aesthetic tradition and during the so-called era of the foundational Cartesian attitude it has been "natural" to conceive of the human body as aesthetically mouldable matter and a dance work as a scenic and symbolic performance as the aesthetic conceptual model of artworks has implied.

What is important to notice is that according to the old Platonist metaphysics, in the realm of true reality e.g. of supra-sensible, of *pure ideas*, there is no actual lived time, no actual lived place, no real life situation, no mortality; the ideal truth of what is, is timeless and permanent. And how does this affect dance?

For dance it means that the dancer's body has been seen as a representation of the ideal or striving towards it. "Body" has not been reflecting my individual situated consciousness. Neither has "the body" been seen as a terrain for mutual kinetic-*logos* and the historical world to express its self. Rather a dancer's body has been seen as a tool (or instrument) for representing a general idea (through ideal body, one amongst many alike). In the ideal world there is no otherness or difference; there is only sameness, the totality of the right idea. A dancer's body has been seen as mouldable matter for a movement sculptor to shape according to the timeless, permanent and general idea. (From this point of view it can be understood why geometrical ideas and forms - which are 'permanent and true' mathematical ideas in spatial dimensions - have been such obligatory obvious ways of conceiving, constructing and understanding choreography.)

Within this perspective, the skills of an artist have been considered to be in close affiliation with the techniques of *production*. Accordingly, a choreographer's skills have been understood as the ability to shape movement and organize moving bodies in space and time to create an aesthetically constructed form, a movement composition, utilizing the motional body as material. A dancer's skills have been understood as the ability to produce movement-material and to be "a perfect tool", an interpreting instrument for the movement sculptor to work with. In my research I discussed how the dancer's and choreographer's skills have

traditionally been understood basically from this approach which the tradition of aesthetics – developed basically from the 2000 year-old Western metaphysics – has offered for dance.

Dance-art has often been generally defined as "movement in time and space". How is then the relationship to *time* and *space* understood in this aesthetic tradition? If "the moving body" is primarily seen as material for movement composition – which draws its construction regulations from a "mathematical realm" – it can happen that "the body's" own situated *being* is concealed or absent. In other words the "body's" own lived temporality, situatedness and therefore its own sense for factual being is in a way absent. Following this the *lived* and *limited time of human existence* has been rather concealed while *time* has been something like a neutral *calculable element* of a dance work; time and space are *used* as elements of a dance composition. Time is seen as *kronos*, constant existence, which is structured into calculable, metric values. Time and space are considered to be neutral elements to be used and filled.

The sense of choreography is thus not *grounded* on the notion that the world reveals itself to us only as a temporal and spatial event, but this factuality is concealed. To simplify, the creation of a choreographic Gestalt is understood mainly as a craft (of forming material). A choreographer's aim is not considered to find a primary relationship to the unconcealedness of *existence*, but rather to form a representation of somewhat previously known ideas.

Some remarks of the philosophical grounds in new dance orientations

After addressing the above issues, I present the new paradigmatic orientation of dance, which has been greatly influential during the last decades and has deviated from the aesthetic tradition. In it "the body" is not considered first and foremost to be mouldable matter but a manner of the happening of individual existence. Further, "the body" is also seen as a terrain, where the kinetic laws of motion, and the belonging to the mutual ground of existence, can shine forth with the help of dancer's *techne*: his/her bodily knowledge.

I combine this new way of conceiving the body and dance, with on the one hand, Heidegger's critique of metaphysics, the philosophy of existence and phenomenology, and on the other hand, with the Asian bodily traditions of wisdom. I believe the latter also to have strongly influenced the evolvement of the new paradigm of dance and the new ways of understanding a dancer's skills. In all of those influences mentioned above the basic need to confront and comprehend reality can be seen, not from the metaphysical separation to higher, true reality of supra-sensible idea and lower realm of sensible matter, but from the *situated bodily existence* in the midst of the world. In the point of situated-bodily-existence one cannot

eventually separate matter and spirit, body and intellect without executing the life. By focusing on the situated existence of every creature one confronts the world in different ways than by confronting the world mainly as objects for knowledge, material and a reserve fund for humans to use.

So according to my interpretation, the subject matter of the new dance orientations – which developed together with the changes in the 20th century philosophy – is about much more than just a change from one dance aesthetic to another, or just the introduction of “soft” body techniques and unique bodyliness. It is about a change in understanding of reality, as described above, and therefore it has also laid a demand and possibility to develop new ways of understanding of dance, choreography and dancer’s skill. Thus, it has also brought the important philosophical discourse, the critique of "metaphysics of subjectivity", into dance. This critique has also brought about new *deep ecological ethics* where the philosophical horizon is formed by the shared participation in being-in-the-world.

Dance-ontological orientation

The new paradigmatic orientation in dance-art has developed during the whole 20th century, partaking in the breakdown of the so-called Cartesian metaphysics. In my view, it culminated though in illuminating way in the American postmodern dance in 1960s and 1970s and is still developing both artistically and theoretically, parallel and intertwined with the older dance-aesthetic tradition.

According to my interpretation, in the new paradigm the foundations for the meaningfulness of dance-art is not primarily looked for in aesthetically formed movements but in the manner in which dance sets up the disclosedness of existence as bodily consciousness, conscious motion. "The body" is not mainly viewed as material for *representation of supra-sensible themes or ideas*, but it is also understood that an individual's perceptive action and *conscious movement in itself, is a unique way of thinking and, therefore possesses a power for disclosure of reality.*

Rather than the dancer attempting to construct a performance that is about the world, she or he receives and reveals being. The dancer draws from the dynamic kinetics of *phusis*, that is, the *happening* of being, which he or she is unveiling, shining forth. Dance does not utilize space, time, and form like some objectified material but discloses being’s temporal and spatial happening, a kinetic-*logos*, the bodily involvement in being, interpreted through a

historically situated world. Therefore, a dancer's skill cannot be understood merely as a technique of production, but as bodily knowledge, which is about generating disclosedness.

Thus this new dance orientation and ancient thinking shake hands. In the dawn of Western philosophy, Herakleitos was quoted criticizing the self-understanding of man: "Although the *logos* is common to all, most people live as if they had a wisdom of their own." (Herakleitos/Eliott 1966, 1) As I interpret this quote, I understand that the question of meaningfulness in dance cannot be separated from a wider horizon. The question of how do we inhabit our common world should in dance be based on our mutual ground of historically situated-bodily-existence and the kinetic-*logos* of Being. To work that out, to interpret that in every dance-work's unique Gestalt, the dancer's skills need to be understood as *techne*, as bodily knowledge, as bodily consciousness.

Dancer's *techne* and the poetic movement of Being

In my understanding, dancer's skills in new dance orientations are understood more as *techne* and less as body-technical ability. *Techne* is grounded on the practice of bodily awareness. It can be outlined as a research of the body's functional intelligence: the understanding and practice of kinetic-body-logos. (Asking questions such as how a person moves, what sense and reason guides it?) *Techne* as bodily knowledge is also a research into how the movement possesses power for disclosing of the historical world. It can be described as the ability to listen and perceive the lived body experience and bodily memory. Thirdly I include to dancer's *techne* the practice of certain non-reacting and non-acting, which brings the dancer away from conventional body instrumentalism to functionally perceptive, unique here-moment and body-mind integrity.

Here-moment means two intertwining things. Firstly, it is the instant presence in our bodily existence, here and now. Secondly, it means presence in *here-world*, in the realm of sense and meaning; the historical (societal, political, economical, cultural) *situation* of the person, with factual existential boundaries and possibilities.

A dancer's bodily knowledge is the ability to stay within the immediate and instantaneous "here-in-the-situation" moment, in the integrity of the body-mind, in which the instrumental and habitual everyday way of conceiving of the body is released into revealing the non-concealed, poetic manner of being.

Strength and speed, which inherently includes rest, waiting and quietness – movement which includes its opposite – is uncaptured and undefined. Uncaptured and undefined, yet

aware and meaningful – this quality opens up the relationship between man and being as it is: we are thrown in-the-midst-of being-towards-death and being-with-others in the historical world. It has no solid foundation, and is therefore an undefined, "empty" mystery.

This quality provides dance the task of *remembering of* and *opening upon* our existential situatedness. Remembering the being-in-the-world as poetry, i.e. art, discloses existence. As such, it is political and awakening, an excess of existence and a gift.

Therefore, dance does not get signified only as a representation of something previously revealed, nor as a mere aesthetic experience. Rather it can be comprehended as *laying out a world* in its involvement with being. It is '*ekstasis*': stepping out of attachment to the prevalent and already signified contemporaneousness into the openness and potentiality of the self and being. It breaks chronological time and radically opens the *situation* in a "chairotic", instantaneous moment where the signifying of the world happens as bodily poetry, poetic motion.

In this way practising dance can be understood as a place for exploring bodily consciousness. In turn, a choreographic process can be understood as a place where kinetic being and the remembrance of our existential situatedness are interpreted through a setting-up of an art work as a *Gestalt*.

When dance is approached from this perspective, the quality or interestingness of dance is not defined by whether it is "understandable" – if understanding means that dance gives an accurate and unambiguous representation of reality or that dance displays a skillful and thus understandable execution of movement. What if the intent of dance is not to imitate reality "understandably", and what if its value and significance is not *based* on virtuous movement ability in itself? What if the intent is to show that existence is *simultaneously* both understandable and unexplainable, a disclosed sensibility and concealed mystery? Movement can never be thoroughly explained, it cannot be mastered by informational knowledge, if it is a way of taking command, of concealing the strangeness of being or objectifying and manipulating the existing.

A small 'manifesto'

Above, I have described how the bodily perception of time and space is disclosing the unique happening of time and space, how it is its *manifestation* in bodily movement. One should not forget that temporality is not separate from human existence, it is not something that a dancing person could use, spend, count, repeat or show. Therefore, in dance, there is nothing

separate from the unconcealedness of existence that one could find a technique for to reveal. Dance does not create or use time, but perhaps receives and donates it by revealing our existence as an event of unique happening of limited time. Dance does not create or use space but discloses it as a meaningful place-situation. Dance poses the question of how our bodily inhabiting *in time* and *place* comes into being. Dance surpasses the unhistorical and objectified existence. It does not freeze the flux of reality into a represented movement (which would be posing), nor does it forget being (which would be objectifying). It does not diligently conduct a building project of the world, but rather stops mechanical building and begins a poetic living – a hearing and sharing the common being-in-the-world with the creatures of the world.

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¹ The dissertation has been published in Finnish by the Theatre Academy of Finland, 2004. Headline translated: *Poetic movement of Being. Philosophical interpretations of the new paradigm of dance in the light of Martin Heidegger's thinking and the artistic work in years 1996-1999 and the appendix Alexander-technique and Authentic movement. Two methods for practicing bodily-knowledge.*

² My research incorporates phenomenology-orientated dance research and existential philosophy, mainly Martin Heidegger's thinking. I utilize some of the terminology of previous dance research, e.g. Maxine-Sheets Johnstone's term *kinetic-body-logos* and the term *thinking-in-movement* from Alexander Technique (may be first used by John Dewey in the 1930s). Another important concept is that of *techne* – central to Heidegger in his philosophical considerations on art – which philosopher Jaana Parviainen has brought up in dance research context. Philosopher Timo Klemola's research of Asian bodily wisdom-traditions and the philosophy of skill have brought up notions of *bodily knowledge* and the descriptions of *contemplative bodily experience* which became important tools in my own analysis of dancer's skill.

For Heidegger art is as an ontological question that deals with the disclosure of truth of being. In my research I examined danceworks and dancer's skill in reference to this "disclosure of truth", following Heidegger's ontology and not as question of aesthetics at all. By doing so I brought the philosophy of Heidegger into the discourse of dance ontology slightly further than previous dance research.

³ The most important writings of Heidegger have been: *Six Basic Developments in the History of Aesthetics* (orig. *Sechs Grundtatsachen aus der Geschichte der Ästhetik*, in *Nietzsche I-II*, 1961), *Taideteoksen alkuperä* (orig. *Der Ursprung des Kunstwerkes*, 1935/36) and *Oleminen ja aika* (orig. *Sein und Zeit*, 1927). Important Heidegger interpretations and art philosophical considerations have been by philosopher Miika Luoto's *Heidegger ja taiteen arvoitus* (Heidegger and the Enigma of Art), Tutkijaliitto, 2002, and philosopher Reijo Kupiainen's *Heideggerin ja Nietzschen taidekäsitysten jäljillä* (After Heidegger's and Nietzsche's Concepts of Art), Gaudeamus, 1997.

⁴ "Metaphysics of subjectivity" is Heidegger's interpretation of the disclosure of reality in the new era: it draws upon Platonist metaphysics, culminating first in Descartes' thinking and in the subsequent era. The term is an ontological definition of prevailing metaphysics where reality is disclosed in the light of certain and permanent knowledge by the knowing subject, always in a representational structure. See e.g. Heidegger 2000b, 22-27; Luoto 2002, 68-69.