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## **Some Notes on Material Discourses (and Their Dialectics) in Contemporary Dance Performance**

A video teaser of Gaëlle Bourgois: *A mon seul desir*  
I'm showing this video excerpt (3.40') as an introduction to the themes of my lecture, which are *material discourses in contemporary dance field*, *the complexity of relations and meanings that art and poetry unravels and creates*, and *the heterocronic time layers* that could be traced within the field of contemporary dance performance.

### **Introduction**

I see that contemporary dance today is an art form that is intensely trying to develop further its' self-understanding and self-reflection. This happens all-over in education, in international seminars and gatherings, in research and in the works of art itself. What is it about this time we live in, that demands such a discussion, and on the other hand, enables it? Is it just a struggle for survival in the midst of ever growing production economy and precariat working conditions that force one to be able to argument for the work and contextualize it in a scholar level? Or is it that dance art is claiming more space and visibility in a media saturated internet society? That it demands deeper understanding of its ontology as a container of complex webs of relations and meanings, in the midst of a consumer culture, based on immediately identifiable products and simplified opinions?

Deviating from the simplistic production economy, anthropologist Gregory Bateson emphasises the complexity that art contains: "In artworks and their interpretation, it seems that rigid focusing upon any single set of relata destroys for the artist the more profound significance of the work. [ ] The art work would be trivial if it is about only one identifiable relata. It is non-trivial or profound

precisely because it is about relationships and not about any one identifiable relativity.” (Bateson 2015, 48).

In the production economy, the product contains and only brings forth identifiable relations, both material usage as well as immaterial, imaginary values. But an artwork, on the other hand, subverts this self-evidence, the usability, consumability; it introduces a network of relations that cannot be controlled through complete identification; it brings forth subconscious, complex mappings of relations, the stirrings of a readymade world. Anthropologist Mary Bateson states that one reason why poetry is important for finding out about the world is because in poetry a set of relationships get mapped onto a level a diversity in us that we don't ordinarily have access to. We bring it out in poetry. We need poetry as knowledge about the world and about ourselves, because of this mapping from complexity to complexity. (Bateson, Mary 2015, 49).

I'm talking about discourses but how is the concept defined? Discourses could be defined as a *systems of related meanings*, a body of text meant to communicate a specific data or a *context of communication*. Discourses affect how the cultural and social order appears and is shaped in different time periods, places and communities. Philosopher Chantal Mouffe states that art could be seen as a form of *material discourse*. Discourses are internalized in the material practices of art, in the performers bodily articulation, in the methods of practicing and creating. But discourses concerning art exist also in speech, images and textual level. Therefore, we can say that discourses in dance are not only *material or linguistic*, they are both, existing in various levels of practice, theory, everyday actions and dance's relation to society.

In this talk I try to analyse some key features of the changes in dance aesthetics during the last decades and articulate some of that complexity that dance as a material discourse contains in its manifold manifestations. I see the current dance scene as a field of multiple discourses and heterocronic, simultaneously operating time layers. I attempt to understand those multi-layered interests that present day dance makers seem to have and formulate some conceptual articulations on them. This is in order to be able to contribute to the cultural discussion, not only by means of art, but also by means of language and speech.

In these times of heterogeneous aesthetic aims if we try to answer to the question of *evaluation* and *quality of art* from the viewpoint of presumed sameness of universal, homogenous aesthetic

values, it seems to do injustice to the manifold of works of art and artists. Rather it seems often more proper to ponder the *credibility of individual artistic processes, the relevance of artistic questions and methodical approaches in each context*. Consequently, the ability to situate oneself within these discourses is increasingly crucial for artists but also for students of art. Therefore, in the last chapter of my talk I will describe briefly how this is taken into consideration in the choreography programme at the Theatre Academy and how do the students, whose workshop demonstrations you will see tonight, situate their personal interests and their work.

### **Main lines of the evolution of contemporary dance since 1900s**

The evolution of western contemporary dance art, its aesthetics and ontology, was intense and expanding throughout the last century. The general line of this evolution could be described as a gradual separation from the traditions of classical ballet to the developments of modern dance since the 1920s and to the postmodern and contemporary dance since the 1960s. Further on, the deviation from modern dance and the sub-genres of contemporary dance could be labelled for example as the “choreographic materiality” of the non-representational dance of the New York avant-garde scene of the 1960s, the outburst of the somatic practices in the *new dance* of the 1970s, the fragmented dramaturgy and addressing the audience in the *dance theatre* of the 1980s, the refusal of using any generic choreographic language, the exhaustion of movement and the *conceptual dance* of the 1990s, and the deconstruction of the performing identities in the so called *performative dance* of the 2000. All these phenomena are of course intertwined with larger discourses in society, politics and philosophies. Therefore, written or oral history of dance, or the analyses of the present day, depends heavily on the chosen perspectives of the interpreter and no comprehensive or total narrative could be presented, just partial views on the issue.

One possible view to interpret the present day is to examine the various *representation modes* that dance has typically used in its world-relation, in certain eras, or within certain ideas concerning the ontology of art. The first profound analyses of the representation modes in dance was informed by semiotic reading by Susan Leigh Foster in her research *Reading Dance. Bodies and Subjects in Contemporary American Dance*. (1986). The modes of *imitation, replication, resemblance and reflection* were placed within the era of their typical use and linked to the larger cultural histories. If for example the *replication mode* was typical for the expressive and symbolic

modern dance era, the resemblance was typical for the somatic and perception practises based dance, the *reflection mode* was typical for the abstract postmodernism informed by the phenomenological minimalism.

Within the limited time frame of this talk, I chose to continue now in presenting an overview to the contemporary dance scene from the perspective of somewhat opposing dialectics. This is due to show how varied and heterogeneous the artistic aims are and how sometimes opposite their aesthetic values can be. Different genres or artistic aims carry diverse genealogy in their constitution, they relate to varied phenomena and era in dance history and take part to diverse discourses in culture and society. The historically evolved features of dance have served in the time of their emergence certain artistic vision and worldview and contained certain views to the issues of for example representation, composition, dramaturgy, agency, identity, ontological insights and categorizations concerning reality. One can and maybe should ask whether those notions or terminologies are still accurate and whether they serve properly one's artistic aims, or does one need to revise the methods as well as terminologies in order to highlight the current themes.

### **Some interpretations of the dialects in the contemporary dance performance**

On the one hand we have the ancient idea of the pedagogic and indoctrinating mission of dance, of which most prominent manifestation is handed down to us from the Baroque period of the 17th Century. Besides to achieve certain aesthetic realm, the purpose was also to create a subject that maintains harmony and order in society, an obedient body. We are talking about an identity that is thought to be permanent and whole and which is choreographed and maintained by carefully constructed styles, techniques, bodily habitus and vocabulary.

In opposition to this we can see the conscious striving, by the end of the 1900s and early 2000s, to continually redefine the subject, to explore the performative power to deconstruct and construct identities by way of addressing the embodied cultural discourses in live performances.

On the one hand we have the idea that is linked with the kinetic ideology of the modern era, the constant move forward, an idea that dance as an art form is defined by the continuity of

movement, a certain kinaesthetic imperative, that dance is dancing, that there is an ontological identification of dance as an art form, the choreography and the continuity of movement.

On the other hand, we can see, as a countermovement, the criticism towards the ever accelerating kinetics of modernity and the homogenizing production economy, criticism that appeared as motifs of stopping the movement and introducing the individual subject. This is aimed at also to the separation of the choreography from the continuous and generic “dance movement”. Dance art started to be seen as a means to explore the *choreographed world* as such. Therefore, the theme of the choreographic study could be for example how bodies, subjects, values or meanings are choreographed by habits, ideologies, economies and politics.

The question of *choreographed societies* and *subjects* could also be explored by studying how we see the legitimization of the dancing subject. On the one hand we see that the acceptance and credibility depend on certain technical dance skills, an established movement technique or virtuosic control of a style that is achieved by years of hard practice and devotion. This achieved skill opens up possibilities of expression and passing on the tradition which is not possible without it. Within this lineage the quality of movement and the dancer’s skill differ greatly from those of everyday movement and non-professional individual. In this context the “amateur body” on stage is hardly considered proper in this material discourse.

But since 1960s and gradually in larger extent, this notion has been expanded. The separation of the choreographic and the virtuoso movement, the deconstruction of permanent identities, the critique of the society of the spectacle and the notion of social choreography have opened a wider space for artistic expression. There has emerged an understanding that the dancing subject, in his/her individual *bodily articulation*, is expressive in artistic sense and the acceptability or credibility of the dancing is seen as an issue of *defining the context of each performance*, the *relevance of the methods used* and the *relevance of performance dramaturgy*.

How about then the legitimacy of choreography if on the one hand the notion of dance art is tightly woven with the skilful dancing subject and on the other hand, the choreographic subject can be any individual, situation or even a framed system in a certain performance context? Knowingly simplifying this question, I see that especially within certain, more established or large

audience contexts, some formal features of “a good and credible choreography” could be defined. Such as the handicraft quality of the *movement* composition: the aesthetically unified movement language, the consistent development of the movement motifs, the homogeneous performers, the choreographic complexity, the inventiveness of the movement vocabulary, and finally the coherence and the un-problematizing dramaturgy of the compositional whole.

**But when** artistic study sets its starting point in a wider quest of exploring the choreographed world as such, it has to find and define its particular themes, methods and relationships to representation and composition anew in each time. This situation reminds the situation familiar with for example in contemporary fine arts, where each individual artist defines her/his relationship to art history, and each work of art is a singular process of artistic research within the medium, its material, practices and conventions. So how to understand these choreographies and where to situate them? I suggest that the choreography can be viewed as a tool to explore and unravel *corporeal world-relations* and *material discourses* in art and society. The legitimacy or credibility, (if one wants to use these kind of valuing operations at all) could be thought of depending for example on the *relevance of the artistic questions, the used methods, the web of relations that the work brings forth, the contextual awareness* and the *articulation of the performance event*. Instead of fulfilling the preconceived ideas of choreographic continuum, the composition might need and use strategies such as aesthetic discontinuity, heterogeneous motives and performers, decentralized dramaturgy, interruption, emergent and systemic structures and scores, “intertextuality”, multiracial consciousness and contextualized relations to processes and materials.

**And finally** considering the role and position of the artist, we have the established notion of the relationship between artist and artwork: the individual artist is the auteur of an original work of art, she/he owns the work of art, and this ownership determines the value of the artwork in the art market, depending of course how the artist’s production has been ranked in value in the fields of art.

**An opposing** practice would be for example the collective creation of an artwork, shared auteurship and joint ownership of the artwork, open access distribution of the choreography, free entry performances, social choreography projects etc. All these features cause difficulty in

determining the market exchange value of the artwork or the artists in the field of art. And it is necessary to remark that these practices get rather quickly appropriated by the market in such a way that the 'creativity' of the artist, even when jointly perceived and legitimated, does not yet or necessarily strengthen the position of the artists themselves.

To conclude this chapter of my lecture, it is thus my understanding that the field of contemporary dance is characterized by the diversity of approaches in which hardly anyone, would identify themselves fully with the dichotomies I listed but find themselves in various relations to all these factors. Rather than assume sameness among the dance artists, the present day dance field is built with ontological and aesthetic differences and parallelism.

### **How then should higher art education react to this situation?**

And not only react but be proactive in educating people for future. In addition to relating to international (art) world, every institution has its own local and contextual environment to operate with. Theatre Academy in Helsinki has already a considerable history in artistic research and a quite strong research community. That, plus the fact that some of the professors, including me, are besides professional artists also doctors in art, meaning they have a certain research take in their work, that affects to the overall orientation of the programme curriculum. The choreography programme at the Theatre Academy is quite demanding in that within its two years of Master studies, it emphasizes both the solid knowledge of the histories and ontologies of choreography, especially after the 1960s and the postmodern and performative turn, and the open minded exploration of the current choreographic research questions, methods and practices. In other words, choreographies are seen as forms of material discourses and students are encouraged to both unravel and create those in their own practices. That is the overall vision; every study path is of course individual and partial. No one can achieve more than is possible and relevant for them to further their maturing after the graduation.

At the moment four students are studying in the MA in Choreography and ten students in the MA in Dance Performance Programme. The works you will see tonight are from just two choreography students, performed with their colleagues from the MA in Dance Performance. The group works are their first study year workshop demonstrations from last spring and the solo from last autumn.

The main study objective was to explore composition and contemporary choreographic questions, discourses and methods. The specific themes of the workshops were “new materialisms in art”, “medium translations”, “emergent choreography” and the “question of heterogeneous stage”. While the workshops were linked to seminars and reading, it seemed obvious, that all of those issues echoed to a global concern of the use of the natural resources, the equality of lifeforms and the question of societal exclusion and inclusion. The profound need to be able to shake and revise the pre-given ontological categories was recognized and some of the workshops demonstrations attempts to research these issues by artistic and choreographic means. None of the demonstrations tried to handle their themes by narrative, symbolic or representational means. Rather the emphasis was to scrutinize the themes within the corporeal and material realm, within the choreographic itself and its organizing and perceptual principles. The demonstrations are worked within about three weeks of time and were performed in a rehearsal studio setting.

The solo *in-between* by Jenni-Elina von Bagh sets its starting point in the certain state of in-betweenness, in places and states that have not arrived to their closure. This could be seen as the oscillation of the identities, both as the uncomfortableness that the fixed roles or positions put one self, and as opening up a state of possibilities. Here a performer oscillates between a position of a performer on stage and a mother at home, between fixed steps of choreography and acting spontaneously according perceived possibilities, oscillating between construction and destruction, between joy and despair.

In the work called *Tension* by Sara Gurevitsch, the dancers were occupied with the tension-release dynamics in the physical body. Through the tension practice they found a concept of “invisible borders” within the body and the space around them. The physical transformations happening in the materiality and the limits of their physical bodies, the connectedness of other bodies as a field of tensions within invisible borders, created the compositional structure for this work.

The last work *Papers and Pens* by Jenni-Elina von Bagh studies the collision of language and corporeality after being inspired by the new materialist philosophy texts. The choreographer writes: “We aim to provide conditions for the body to encounter a question – both as the influenced and the influencer. Concepts such as Becoming woman/animal/insect (by Rosi Braidotti), dislocation, shattering of categories, assemblage and heterogeneous stage have all



surged through our process. The storyline isn't "look at us fooling around". Instead, it is a determined effort to try and break down the existing categories."

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### **Bio Kirsi Monni:**

Doctor of arts (Dance), Professor Kirsi Monni has worked as a choreographer, dancer, teacher and researcher since 1980s. Within her career she has created over thirty full length choreographies for various dance companies and free-lancer artists. Monni completed her doctoral studies at the Theatre Academy Helsinki in 2004. In her written thesis she analysed paradigm shifts in western dance art during the twentieth-century and outlined a current ontology for dance art in dialogue with the fundamental ontology of Martin Heidegger. Among her awards are two times the Finland State Price for Dance Art and three times the 5-year State Grant for a dance artist. She is a founding member of Zodiak - Center for New Dance in Helsinki where she worked in a position of trust as a member of artistic director team and the executive board for two decades and as the artistic director for the year 2008. She has published several articles on dance ontology and choreography and gives lectures in different universities. She has been working as professor in choreography since 2009 at the Theatre Academy of the University of the Arts Helsinki.