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Social Choreography and Post-humanist Philosophies - notes and methodologies of two streams of interest in the field of contemporary choreography

This talk deals with two main titles, social choreography and post-humanist philosophy, in relation to artistic practices in contemporary choreography. These topics are very much interlinked with each other, but those discourses and theories from which I look at them are different, so it might be wise to keep them separate and only in the end or perhaps in our discussion afterwards, try to see them together.

PART I

Let's first ponder a bit of those concepts, *social* and *choreography*. Social is living together, and it contains questions of *how* we live together, what is *we*, who is included or excluded, how the social is structured, and how we negotiate on the sharing of the resources, the politics, and so on. In every society there is always various ways of how the social is structured, organized or, one could say *pre-choreographed*. If choreography concerns of movement and its organization in many levels (and here movement is thought of as inseparable of meaning and experience), then social choreography, as a field of art, focuses on those aspects of how the social is, or could be choreographed, by artistic means and motivations, diverging of for example purely economic, political or pedagogical means and motivations.

As an artist, one is of course aloud to draw from that pool of knowledge which his or her artistic education and bodily and choreographic knowledge contains. However, in addition to this, I have always been interested in approaching artistic questions from various research points of views, to gain broader understanding of the theme, and to let both knowledges, art, philosophy and research, cross fertilize and interact with each other.

Social Choreography – from the critical theory point of view

In connection to social choreography at least two research approaches have been interesting to me: they are post-structural critical theory and system theories. Using the tools of critical theory professor Andrew Hewitt published his influential book *Social Choreography* in 2005. There he presents that ideology needs to be understood as something embodied and practiced, not just as an abstract form of consciousness. In other words, ideologies are embodied and practiced in all social spheres, hence the term social choreography. Hewitt is linking dance history and the aesthetics of everyday movement, such as walking, stumbling and laughing, to historical ideals of social order. Doing that he is able to show the relationships of aesthetics and ideology and their mutual constitution. One discovery of his analyses is a historical shift in the mid-nineteenth century from understanding of *play* as the condition of human freedom to one prioritizing labor as either the realization *or* alienation of embodied human potential. Maybe the most far reaching question for us, the choreographers and dancers, could be taken from Hewitt's claim that besides the social choreographies simply *reflect* social order, they also *enact* social order, take part of its constitution and change. So, one might ask, what social work does the choreography perform?

Researchers Ana Vujanovic and Bojana Cvejic have been elaborating this perspective in their book *Public Sphere by Performance* (2012). In it they focus on the question of the 'public', how do we understand it in this era of neoliberal privatization or in the *images* of social and public, that are currently imposed on us. They analyze these questions through the prism of performance, linking some recent methodologies and procedures of choreographic performances as manifestations of political unconsciousness of contemporary choreography. For example, they are linking the operations of explicit task based (score) or single-issue performances to specific political and economic ideologies, e.g. *transparency*, as a means of regulation and registration in governmental politics.

Social Choreography – form systems theoretical point of view

Quite different take on social choreography is for example dramaturge Steve Valk's and choreographer Michael Klien's interest in *system wisdom*, intuition and holistic worldview. I

encountered Valk and Klien in 2005 when they were performing at the Side Step festival in Helsinki. In a post-performance discussion, they were describing a quite huge social event that had happened in Frankfurt and which they called social choreography. It was commissioned by choreographer William Forsythe, with whom they both were working at the time. The event consisted of many kinds of encountering for Frankfurt citizens, varying from collective dinners to sleep overs, to occupying city theatre, and artistic playground for families. Since then they both have been developing the concept both theoretically and in practice.

For Steve Valk, social choreography was born of a state of inability, cultural deep-freeze, feeling that art no longer has a role, place or purpose in terms of social change. Its development has been affected by the mutual distrust of artists and the public towards traditional social and cultural institutions and the need to think again and dismantle existing practices and structures. For Valk, the idea of social choreography is to mobilize creative capacities in the community and citizens. A social choreographer applies his artistic knowledge in order to produce special situations in which a citizen can reach his or her abilities and enter into a kind of ritual, liminal state in which the previously existing logic and the "how things are" can be forgotten, shaped and dreamed again. Valk describes these "spaces" and situations as blank billboards, whose roots are in alternative theater and dance productions, but which collapse the distinction between reality and fictional frame, and re-emphasize our role as citizens, dreamers and creators of our own world. (Valk 2008).

In the early days, both Valk and Klien emphasized the theoretical and ethical influences behind their work. The most important is a holistic world view, supported by 20th century theories, e.g. cybernetic information theories, systems theories and environmental philosophy. To put this view quite simply, we need to think about *relationships and contexts, interaction* between systems through *systemic wisdom*. There is of course a need for separate elements and causal connections (as reductive model), but definitely there is also a need for an understanding of circumferential, time-progressing interactions. Everything is moving. Everything affects everything. Underestimating this is dangerous and damaging. Each system is part of a wider system whose circular feedback loop interfaces include communication. Applying this kind of systemic thinking it might be possible to reframe the human identity and self-understanding and its constitutional and situational parameters anew. Social Scientist Gregory Bateson, who has been very influential in

Valk's and Klien's thinking, suggests for example that it is possible to define the "mind" again, how we understand the constitution of the human intelligence and consciousness. For Bateson, mind is not a feature of the brain, not even the human body, but is immanent in the whole of the brain, body, and environment. The unit of survival is not just a human, but a human plus environment. (Checkland 1993).

The ethical motivation for system wisdom rises from the fact that *part* of the system does not know enough to manage the whole and the lack of systemic wisdom always gets its punishment. The car production company's managing director can succeed with system *knowledge* to increase its automotive sales. But system *wisdom* forces him to consider, in addition to immediate goals, the social and environmental values of the activities as well as the impact of products on nature, as a Finnish researcher Jussi Hirvi is writing. (Hirvi 2006)

The need for systemic wisdom creates this current situation in which the importance of creativity and art in the modern society emerges in a new way. From this point of view, the task of art is to expose diverse contexts of activity, including the importance of non-conscious parts of the mind, body and locality in guiding activities, as Jussi Hirvi writes. (Hirvi 2006). Hirvi is particularly concerned of a holistic worldview and states that "the enlightenment's dream of a rational man is a dangerous myth. It paradoxically gives rise to uncontrollable irrationality, as it prevents underlining ideological and mythical assumptions from being brought about by a rational debate – because they do not really exist according to the myth. If we want an ecological human image, it is dangerous and false to try to expel emotions, intuition, myths, rituals, physical and ecological bonds from rational to a strictly fenced ghetto. " (Hirvi 2006, 130).

How could this potential be raised? What kind of thinking is needed? One of the most important aspects is certainly the change of the old concepts of knowledge production, perception and information. A division of the knowledgeable subject and object of knowledge must be rejected. Knowledge is not the pursuit of "truth" or "reality", but the interaction between the learned and the known, which is dependent on many biological, psychological, cultural and other factors. " (Hirvi 2006, 119). When knowledge formation is understood as the most dialogical and interactive event, and when art is interpreted as an ontological - not just an aesthetic - point of view, as a

manifestation of being and the work of opening the world, then dialogical *interaction* (in material level, in artistic processes) may become a profound motif for artistic creation.)

A sensible public space

Perhaps quite idealistically, but nevertheless very seriously, Steve Valk continues to shape the principles of social choreography in a way that echoes systemic thinking and the ritualistic transformative power of art: Social choreography can create meaningful public spaces. It can produce imaginative and created new places for artists and citizens to face and participate, both being as well artists and citizens at the same time. This is a context in which social wisdom can be restored and where a deeper body-mind consciousness of the "communal body" can be enlivened. This is the area of play, awareness, and subconscious interaction between the sensitive child in us. Thus, social choreography is in a way a new stage in the art of dialogue or dialogue in art. (Valk 2008)

Philosopher and neuroscientist Francesco Varela, in turn, have been pondering the potentialities of new art forms from the point of view of dialogical interaction. He describes for example the interactive virtual art (VR) as follows: It is an open dynamic process that combines two realities, two elements, subject and object, and acts in a mutually active way. This will lead to changes on both sides, even though it maintains the original relationship. The user and the artist come together with this process and communicative aesthetic experience. (Valk 2008).

Choreographer Michel Klien, for his part, has specifically considered the role of choreographer in the perspective of social choreography. He also seeks to see the choreographer himself as part of the "choreography" of existing and all-time physical, mental and social structures. The choreographer acts as a strategist, negotiating the desired change in his environment. Choreography is a creative act that sets the conditions for things to happen. The choreographer is the designer, negotiator and architect of a flexible, fluent environment, of which he himself is a part. Klien even formulates a metaphoric role for dance and a dancer in a society: dancer could be a free, uncontrolled metaphor - someone who does not move in a predetermined way and is not limited to the ways of the past. (Klien 2007).

If social choreography is characteristically focusing on these aforementioned aspects, creating meaningful situations and setting the conditions for interactive things to happen, then *critical performing choreography* tends to zoom in questions concerning *composition* and *representation* when trying to find, not only reflection to current situation but ways to enact visions for new kind of subjectivities and identities from holistic or even post-humanistic point of view.

Social choreography events and projects at the Zodiak – center for new dance, photos.

- Extensive community work and art based social choreography over a decade.
- Largest event U.N.I. in 2009, mentor Steve Valk.
- Innovative concepts such as Choreographer's Reception (Favela Vera Otriz), Paikka Auringossa (Jenni Koistinen), Mamuska Nights (Daghda Dance Company)
- Long term projects e.g. Minun nimi on (My name is)- suburban project
- Recent e.g. (Jenni Koistinen, Pia Lindy) Aidatut Unelmat (Sari Palmgren).

PART II

Post-Humanistic Philosophy and New Materialism in Interaction with Contemporary Choreography (and the question of subjectivity from the choreographic point of view)

Post-humanist philosophy is not a single discipline but contains multidisciplinary approaches to critically examine the legacy of enlightenment and humanism to the extent that its anthropocentrism has been involved in the exploitation of other creatures and the ecological and political problems at hand. These problems have raised the need to question traditional ontological categories, critically examine the issue of identity and subjectivity and include ecology and sustainable development as a deeply political issue.

Whereas post-humanist philosophy has focused on these aforementioned concerns in theoretical level, have many contemporary choreographers dealt with these questions in material-discursive level, turning into ideas of new materialisms (as a strand of post-humanist thought) and trying to find strategies to translate post-humanist concerns into artistic methodologies, more precisely into questions on subjectivity, identity, power relationships, representation and the ontologies of choreographic composition.

The most profound starting point, which almost every post-humanist philosopher share, in spite of their epistemological differences, is the need to *overcome the bifurcation of humans and nature*, the division of pre-set and clearly defined ontological categories of subject and object, organic and inorganic, material and meaning, and critically question their traditional descriptions and representations. What becomes instead is a state of conceptual and representational oscillations and transversal relations, whether in theory or art.

Feminist philosopher Rosi Braidotti explores in her influential book *The Posthuman* (2013) the extent to which a post-humanist move *displaces the traditional humanistic unity of the subject*. Rather than perceiving this situation as a loss of cognitive and moral self-mastery, she argues that the posthuman helps us make sense of our flexible and multiple identities. And when talking about our identities we need to again ask, how do we define *we*, who or what is included or excluded from these definitions? Braidotti takes a clear stance on this and suggest to extent our notion of subjectivity and identity to practicing the idea of *becoming-animal*, *becoming-earth*, *becoming-machine*. (Braidotti 2012, 67-95.)

In the book *Vibrant Matter* (2010) political theorist Jane Bennett shifts her focus from the human experience of things to things themselves. Bennett argues that political theory needs to do a better job of recognizing the active participation of nonhuman forces in events. Bennett theorizes a “*vital materiality*” that runs through and across bodies, both human and nonhuman. She explores how political analyses of public events might change, if we would acknowledge that agency always emerges as the effect of ad hoc configurations of human and nonhuman forces. She suggests that recognizing that agency is distributed this way, and is not solely the province of humans, might spur the cultivation of a more responsible, ecologically sound politics.

Process, experience and interaction plus other concepts to dance with

Underlying task in all these ideas is the overcoming of dualist categorizations, but also a notion of *process* and *movement* in all existence. Mathematician and philosopher Alfred North Whitehead combines these all in his lecture series written already in 1927. He proposes a speculative ontology which is based entirely to the idea of entities as processual events, as *actual occasions*, which are in continuous interaction with each other. Whitehead emphasizes that the subject and

the world are constituted in the reciprocal and mutual interaction in *experience*. (Pyyhtinen & Tamminen 2014)

For Whitehead all entities are *experiencing, feeling subjects*. Even the stone *feels* the warmth of the sun. The warmth partakes the constitution of the stone. The earth under the stone in turn feels the stone and is constituted by the stone and vice versa. And Karen Barad, a theoretical physicist, continues from here: “Matter feels, converses, suffers, desires, yearns and remembers” (Barad 2012). For Whitehead but also for Barad there *is nothing* in separation of experience, which is already a form of interaction. The *interaction constitutes* the thing. Different *senses can grasp* and feel different parts of the world in different ways. Body is a method for grasping the reality as well as it is forming the reality. Things, creatures are expressive, they express themselves to others as possibilities for interaction (prehension); and in mutual interaction, they are constituted by each other. (Barad 2012, Pyyhtinen & Tamminen 2014).

The posthumanist and process-philosophical approaches are loaded with unfamiliar and new concepts. This might cause irritation and rejection, understandably. However, the creation of new concepts is a fundamental part of the task of finding new understandings. Researcher Milla Tiainen with her colleagues articulate the status of conceptual work in the discipline as follows: Concepts have practical force. Concepts form in relations beyond the linguistic while being able to *modulate various registers of reality*, from the cognitive and discursive to the sensory and perceptual, from co-lived, pragmatically collective to ethical and political. (Tiainen et al. 2015,17).

That is why a conceptual work is also so important in artistic work, especially in performing arts, where you work collectively, and share your thoughts and intentions with others. Often the concepts and language used in art traditions and education carry within themselves a loaded amount of historically formed aesthetic norms, ideals and values. For example, the two concepts we share together, choreography and composition, are usually very much understood according to respective education and context. Or even left without rigor thinking. To find ways how the post-humanist questions and concepts could be dealt with in contemporary choreography and composition, one needs to put them into interaction with each other.

One of the mediating concepts and methodological tools that have proven to be fruitful and constructive is the concept of *translation* (which one of the graduating choreography students, Jenni-Elina von Bagh, have been especially working with and which we will hear more today in her theses presentation). To work with translation within this discourse, does not mean to create a literal representation of the concept's defined meanings with a movement performance. Rather it is to let some of aspects of those *relations* and *connections* that the concept opens, resonate and interact with the dancers bodily thinking and with the relations and connections of the compositional structures and elements in-the-making.

Some other concepts in the post-humanist discourse that could be put into a choreographer's toolkit and researched more in practice, could be for example: dislocation, de-territorialization, co-resonance, intra-action, in-betweenness, transversal interaction and an assemblage of agencies. These are instantly *choreographic concepts*, meaning that they have the *potentiality of movement and transformation* in them. Besides they might be useful in contemplating the ontology of composition, they could work as methods in finding disciplined and layered but *non-representational* bodily articulation in movement. Therefore, they might work as methods for larger post-humanistic concern, which is to displace the traditional humanistic unity of the subject and instead enact a vision for deeply processual and interactive subjectivities.

Three more concepts and methodological suggestions

And to direct this talk now even more into practice of art, I will conclude with three methodological suggestions for artistic practice. They have been brought for through artistic research in new materialism. They are proposed by Finnish researchers Milla Tiainen, Katve-Kaisa Kontturi and Ilona Hongisto in an article titled: *Framing, Following, Middling. Towards Methodologies of Relational Materialities* (2015).

These concepts, *framing, following, middling*, rise from the new materialism's ideas of active, agential, affective and affected matter and from the aim to extend the operation of new materialisms as concepts in practice or the practicing of concepts, thinking in action. These concepts reflect, in the researcher's words: the commitment to developing models of immanent and continuously emergent relationality, the irreducibility of the in-betweenness to the connecting

terms, and on the intensive topological spaces of co-affectivity these models provide for thinking the overcoming the traditional dualisms of nature/culture, subject/object and so on. (Parikka 2010).

As a concept, the *framing* works at least in too operative levels. The first one deals with the topic of dislocations and re-historisation. A cultural object is never stable but is in process and prone to transmutation and change. Stating a curatorial and temporal aspect to framing, instead of contextual interpretation, cultural theorist Mieke Bal sees that these changes are brought upon by *discursive choices and material conditions* that are not of the art works own time. This operation re-historicises them, it places the objects in novel narratives where their meanings are rendered lively. (Bal in Tiainen & co 2015, 22.) Framing as an act of territorialisation shifts the emphasis, not to the art work per se, but toward *networks of relations* that undulate from the frame. (Tiainen et al. 2015, 24).

Quite different take on framing can be found from philosophers Guattari's and Deleuze's notions on *ontological account of the frame and the arts*. For them framing confines in order to release. "Art is a territorial praxis - *the drawing of boundaries*. Framing encloses bodies, places and sounds within a territory in such a fashion that they become expressive of immeasurable dimensions and indeterminate forces." (Tiainen et al. 23) This territorial conception of framing points to how objects and things become expressive in and of themselves in the process of connecting with other objects and things. Philosopher Elisabeth Groz summarizes the work of the frame as follows: "With no frame or boundary there can be no territory, and without territory there may be objects or things but not qualities that can become expressive, that can intensify and transform living bodies." (Groz 2008,12.)

The concept of *following* in turn suggest for patient attentiveness to the event quality of the studied things. For Guattari and Deleuze 'matter-flows can only be followed'. (Deleuze & Guattari 1987, 372-3). Tiainen with her colleagues manage to elaborate what this following could specifically mean. They think that it is "eligible only if one is interested in engaging with a continuous variation of variables, instead of extracting constants from them. [] That seeks to appreciate the *intensive qualities* of matter and prefers to work on the level of their action without transcendent ambitions of determining what they represent. It would strive to let flows

stay flows without straightening them into lines.” (Tiainen et. al. 2015, 30.) Choreographer and philosopher Erin Manning argues that following is not passive, it is reciprocal reaching toward, that is co-emerging. Both or all bodies need mutual incitement to create movement. (Manning 2006, 88-9).

The last concept *middling* might be thought of as a dramaturgical and strategical term. It can be used to specifically change the focus and scale of perception, thus altering the conventional hierarchy of meaning creation. Middling questions the specific understanding of the very character of perception that respective aesthetics can be said to endorse in its compositional strategies and performance techniques. Middling suggest broaden the spectrum of perceptual tendencies to environmental mode of awareness, presentational immediacy, ‘texturing complexity’ and ‘coming to expression’ as Manning and Massumi argues in their discussions on ‘neurotypical’ and ‘neurodiverse’ perception (Manning & Massumi 2014, 4,7, xx). To middle then means to open ourselves to the emergent and inter-relational aspects of perception, to momentarily resist the gravitational pull of rapid perceptual categorisations, assigned for the logics of subject/object and functions. (Tiainen et. al. 2015, 36).

For the conclusion of this talk I would like to draw together the intentions of social choreography and post-humanist philosophy to state that both seeks to reflect and enact a world that is not an ensemble of static and clearly distinct entities but is constituted of dynamically actualizing and changing occasions, intensities and choreographies of experience, matter and meaning.

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