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What Kinds of Ideas Are Guiding Choreographic Work?

- conceptualising choreography since 1960s

Our long history of idealistic aesthetics

In contemporary European choreography the term “conceptual dance” is relatively new; it has been used for some 10-15 years now. But these terms “conceptual dance” or “idea-based dance”, which try to describe certain contemporary approaches to choreography, can be quite problematic because they easily confuse quite different artistic intentions and historical paradigms. We could even say that there is nothing so new in the phenomenon of idea-based dance because every work of art, every piece of choreography has always had a concept. “Every work of art is founded on a conceptual order of ideas, belief, values, procedures and meanings even when they are generated by intuition” as dance theorist Bojana Cvejic has said (Cvejic 2006: 52). In fact, it is not too much of an exaggeration to say that almost the entire western history of art is idea-based. It has been informed by the keen intertwinement of aesthetics and metaphysics. It means that in the western world there has been a dominant notion that artwork imitates - in its aesthetic form - the realm of ideas according our Platonist-Aristotelian metaphysics. An artwork has been seen as a *representation of the ideal realm*, of the truth as a metaphysical idea.

When this notion informs dance it puts the dancer in the position of symbolic existence and of a body-mind split in which the body is seen as an outer carrier of the inner soul and the movement as a medium for an aesthetic representation of the ideal. In spite of the historical differences in aesthetic intentions one could say that the overall paradigmatic ontology for western dance art, from the 16th century classical ballet to the 20th century modern dance, has been one of idealistic aesthetics.

We are all familiar with the ideals of beauty, uniform, control, virtuosity, harmony, homogeneity, abstraction and structural whole for example in classical ballet. But the ideals of the *historical project of Modernism* and its manifestations in dance are already more vague territory.

On the one hand, the modernist concentration on the medium itself brought forward *modern dance* as

a genre of individual movement styles and vocabularies which enabled choreographers to express personal feelings in a transformed, universal form. This genre of expressive modern dance used *movement as a symbolic gesture* and *choreography as a movement-composition* to manifest the dynamic structure of universalized experience or emotion. (Foster 1986; Burt 1998)

On the other hand the modernist strife for absolute abstraction, for autonomous, “pure art” established the somewhat *closed concept of choreography* as an organization of aesthetically moulded *movement material in time-space continuum*. Here *dance is the invention of the body* and it is informed by both implicit aesthetic values and a certain self-reflection *only from within the medium*” (Cvejic 2009: 51).

Critical reflection

This is a simplified but general description about the aesthetic territory that dance after modernism, the American post-modern avant-garde dance of the 1960s and the New York “Judson movement”, was opposing. There was an urgent need to pose some serious questions about those notions of art that reinforce over and over again the historical intertwinement of aesthetics and metaphysics, and that seemed to be out of time in the era of self-critical questioning of the dominant values of western thought and colonialist activity. (Foster 1986; Burt 2006)

For example one could ask: If the modernist ideal is to concentrate on the medium itself, how is the medium defined? Is the human being understood as a bodily moving-unit separated from its environment or is it *understood* as a system of inseparable dynamic interaction with its environment, culture and other beings? If the later is the case, then one could say that there is no autonomous pure art unconditioned by perception, interaction and experience. For the same reason “there is surely no ‘pure dance’ uncontaminated by its social and political context” (Shapiro 1978,196).

If every work of art is fundamentally founded on a conceptual order of ideas, belief, values and procedures one could ask, what kind are they? What kinds of ideas guide the choreographic work? Do I agree with them? If the ontology of art is understood as a *representation of previously disclosed ideas*, one could ponder, how do these ideas set forth the truths of being? Are they my truths? Are they those of different races, gender and social classes, cultures? What do they impose, represent, suggest?

This kind of critical reflection on the ontology of dance is leading to a paradigm shift and is opening at least two intertwined strategies for new dance. One is the discussion on the concepts that inform the choreographic practices and the other one could be drawn from the question Martin Heidegger proposed: what if art is not ontologically understood at all as a representation of some previously disclosed ideas but very differently, as an activity where every work of art according its unique happening (*Gestalt*, shape, figure) brings forth new meanings and insights of the human condition, of reality? (Heidegger 1995/1935)

This thematization of choreographic practice itself and this new proposition for the ontology of art are suggesting the notion that *choreography is not a closed but open concept*. It is a concept that is expanded and modified in every process of artistic work. It uses tools that the lived interaction with one's environment, with one's particular historical, cultural and personal situation suggests and those tools don't need to be anymore of those "so-called immanent but actually inherited beautiful forms of eternal value" (Cvejic'2009: 52). Instead, the pedestrian and the professional, the material and the conceptual, the nonlinear and the improvised, the collective and the subjective perceptions and reflected representations are all acceptable viewpoints for the work of dance art while it is striving to bring forth new meanings and insights to lived world.

Conceptualising choreography since 1960s

The phenomenon we *today* call conceptual dance is inherited from the post modern Judson avant-garde dance of the 1960s in New York (to name few of its most famous artists Yvonne Rainer, Trisha Brown, Steve Paxton, Deborah Hay) as well as from the European post-modern dance, as for example Pina Bausch's work from the 1970s and 80s (Burt 2006; Lepecki 2006). But the intention to unravel both the historical idealistic aesthetics and the modernist ideals were of course already manifested in dance before the 1960s American post modern dance. The experiments with dancers' kinaesthetic intelligence, improvisation, choreographic procedures and pedestrian movement have been known since the 1950s, for example, in the works of Anna Halprin, Simone Forti and Merce Cunningham. But the everyday movement and urban experiences were manifest already in the 1920s, for example, in the grotesque dances of German Valeska Gert. As well, there had been a search for new kinds of practices of bodily consciousness and embodied experiences since the beginning of 20th

century (as in Alexander and Feldenkreis Techniques, Yoga, Martial Arts, etc.).

All these influences took part in the so called “performative turn”, a broader project of 20th century art. The main line here is the aesthetic-philosophical *turn from art object to event*, from *ideal realm to lived world*. (Fischer-Lichte 2009, 24-37) These intentions were reflecting the new comprehensions of the 20th century reality. Idealistic aesthetics couldn't serve anymore the needs of non-singular views of the world. This “performative turn” may have had its first collective outburst in dance within Judson's works. One could describe the Judson program as *unravelling the heights of idealistic aesthetics and settling down to the particular materiality and the concreteness of bodily existence*. Their manifesto could have been: Movement as activity, dancer's actual weight and physicality, a person in the factual situation, perceived in the context that choreography is framing!

This kind of *embodied experience* repudiated the Cartesian notion of the mind as the ghost in the body's machine. For example, Judson choreographer Trisha Brown “rejected the dualism implicit in the notion that modern dance works from inside out “(Burt 2006, 15). She has said:

My inside is not a little bird fluttering in my chest - it is chockfull up and down the length of me. My inside comes all the way to the edge of my body, through the column of my limb, my neck, my torso, and the bulb of my head.” (Goldberg 1991:6)

As in minimalist sculpture, the work of many Judson choreographers framed the materiality of the dancing body in ways that forced the spectator to acknowledge the presence of dancers' bodies, and to become aware of their own embodied phenomenological relationship to them (Burt 2006, 12-13). It is the artwork's *factual being that opens the significances*; it is the perceived uniqueness in time and place, the durational happening and not the instantaneous revelation of the pure idea. This kind of artwork's factual existence, its material being, does not postulate or represent an idealized or universalized experience. Rather, when performed by human beings, it postulates differences, vulnerability, imperfection, political contextuality; meaning as negotiation happening between the work of art and its audience.

How then did the Judson choreographers do it in the 1960s? They systematically mapped the new syntactic and contextual possibilities and artistic modes of expression for dance. They used several different compositional methods: chance, game structures and collages. Pedestrian, everyday

movements were added to dance vocabulary. Also, people with no technical dance training performed and artists from different disciplines choreographed. Choreography was often transmitted to dancers through improvisational scores, which challenged the hierarchy of author–performer position. Different methods of reflection were used: real-time spoken commentary, logistic instructions were given, choreography was commented on with kinaesthetic irony and unexpected anatomical and syntactic possibilities. All of this provided the audience with the possibility of seeing anew the *bodily activity in itself* and the human in a new 'position', from within the particularities and the complexities of the lived world. (Foster 1986; Burt 2006; Lepecki 2006)

Contemporary conceptual choreography

The dance we call conceptual today does not usually try to withdraw from aesthetic perception; it does not prohibit dogmatically its physicality, nor does it replace the art object with a theoretical object, as was the case with historical conceptual art. It is not any *uniform aesthetic category*, style or technique nor does it share any *common essence*, except maybe the intention to understand choreography as an open concept and dance as a present day embodied art form.

This is also the case with **Ula Sickles'** and **Caroline Dubois'** work, which we are going to see this evening. The fact that they treat choreography as an open concept gives space for the hybridity of influences to arise – as the present day's globalized, culturally critical and well educated choreographer's embodied experience would suggest.

In Ula Sickles' work *Solid Gold*, we don't see an entertaining black guy dancing to the music. Instead we hear his breath and feel his footsteps, which dance around the cultural and colonial history of black Africans. The intense presence of the dancer prohibits the audiences' immersion in an entertaining flow of dancing, thus making visible the dance as a consciously choreographed act, a collection of socio-cultural gestures indicating the economic and political ideologies that lie underneath. From this work I read references to social dancing as well as to the entertainment industry, to undocumented personal histories as well as to collective histories of colonialism and the African Diaspora. What touches me here is the simplicity of the presentation, which allows me to closely perceive the dancing as an embodied thinking of one's cultural and political heritage.

In Caroline Dubois' work one happens to think about how far we have come from the idea that, in order to be considered artistically meaningful, the movement has to represent the ideas of beauty, harmony and virtuosity. Instead this work proposes the overcoming of the body-mind split to the lived situation where every thought and every emotion could be scrutinized by revealing its kinaesthetic form. Here the insistent presence of the dancers takes us to the sphere of kinaesthetic event, of constantly evolving dynamics of power play, pretense, demands and dependence and thus reveals to us something that could not be revealed as such by any other means of communication or art. I see this work as a form of contemporary poetry that is able to ponder on a vast variety of experiential-intellectual-cultural issues integrated in our embodied being.

Conclusion

In conclusion, one could think that both of these works discuss current issues about performance as forum for social action, for embodied interaction and shared authority. There is a growing interest among the artists, audiences and researchers to consider anew the powers of performance: Could performance catalyze community action? Could it engage in difference across multiple borders? Is it able to articulate history and change and renew spiritual traditions? Could it set claims for equity in society? In my opinion, it is also in this kind of a discussion that contemporary "conceptual dance" and choreography, all over the world, wants to take part and contribute to on its own behalf.

My research position:

My artistic doctoral research is based in the issues of dance ontology and its paradigmatic changes from the phenomenological perspective, using especially Martin Heidegger's philosophy as an ontological reference. But today my presentation is also based on the contemporary discussions around conceptual dance, especially to the writings of researchers and philosophers such as Burt Ramsay, André Lepecki, Bojana Cvejic, Susan Foster and my own three decades of experience as a dancer-choreographer, curator, researcher, and since 2009, as the professor of choreography in the Theatre Academy, Helsinki, Finland.

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