

Generative Fictions, or How Dance May Teach Us Ethics

In her article from 1987 called *Dancer and the Dance*, Susan Sontag conflates dance and dancer, engaged in a transcendental relationship to choreography. I would like to posit dancing as the relationship between dance and dancer. Choreography frames, composes and in-forms the dancer's actions, but dance exceeds those actions. Dance is an expression, and it is not the same as its medium, the dancer. Dance and dancer are autonomous, although dance only appears when the dancer dances. Dancing, then, is the relationship at work between the dancer and the dance. Positing a separation between dance and dancer turns dancing into the space between these two. It demands that we choose and experiment with modes of relating, beyond logics of representation (of which dance as self-expression would be the more obvious case, where the dance represents the dancer). Through these poetic and experimental relationships to dance, we may develop ethical relationships to everything we are part of, as implicated or entangled subjects.

Dancing is as much a close encounter (between dancer and dance) as it contains an unbridgeable distance, an incongruity at its very heart. In this text I will present a series of choreographic scores, which all enact this tension between intimacy and distance, this commitment for what may not be known. They frame and motorize dance as an autonomous entity, which is alien to the dancer and towards which the dancer performs a particular relationship; a mindset in-forming her activity.

They ask that the dancer acknowledge and honour the share of strangeness, of unknown and unknowable, within this intimate activity. By scrutinizing the demands that each score places on the dancer, I want to propose that dancing might be a privileged terrain for practicing ethical relationships.

The fact that these are improvisation scores makes the work of dissociation between the dancer and the dance all the more crucial. The past century has been permeated with the search for individual expression and emancipation. As best exemplified by the practice of Authentic Movement¹, improvised dance promised an alignment between inner life and kinetic expression. Refuting the spontaneity of movement as a marker of individual expression opens up the puzzling question of the dance's origin. If dance is an expression, then what does it express? My working hypothesis will be that magic and mystery, whether actual or fictional, can hold the space previously occupied by notions of authenticity and interiority. Charged with mystery, dance can become our teacher in matters of ethics. Charging dance with magic and mystery might help us bring alterity inside our bodies, so that we can dance ourselves out of our selves and into the world.

Lastly, these are all scores I have danced myself. They were developed in the past ten years by dance artists who know each other and who worked together in various contexts, so that these scores might appear as the manifestation of a collective research². An important context for cross-pollination has been the yearly TTT/Teachback³ in Vienna, designed by Jennifer Lacey as a space to doubt and un-do whatever knowledge “we” (artists who teach often) may think we have about dance and pedagogy. TTT/Teachback acted as a catalyst for many shared concerns and curiosities to take new forms, which we all kept tending on our own terms. I am writing about these forms from a so-called middle, addressing their conceptual/ethical stakes, and the work and experience they entail, from an implicated perspective.

In our globalised age, our entanglements reach way beyond what we might even perceive. Every act results from more than one can know, and bears consequences upon more than one knows. In that situation, what relationship (to our self and to the world we are part of) can we choose to elaborate, rehearse and perform by dancing? Karen Barad's theory of agential realism, grounded in the study of quantum field theory, proposes that phenomena are "the ontological inseparability of intra-acting agencies". Following this idea, dancing is also such an inseparability, whose distinct and entangled

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- 1 Authentic Movement is a form created in the 1950s by Mary Whitehouse and developed since then by many of her followers. A person moves with her eyes closed in the presence of a witness, attempting to follow every impulse that emerges, in order to come in touch with her “authentic self”. Originally a therapeutic practice, Authentic Movement is a favourite of dancers who have been using and abusing it for decades (see Yvonne Meier's work for example).
 - 2 Isabelle Stengers explains very well how sciences are collective endeavours; by gathering and writing across these examples, I wish to show how dance as an artistic and conceptual practice is also such a collective process, even though the field might be structured around notions of authorship and originality.
 - 3 TTT was hosted by Jennifer Lacey 2009-12 and under the name Teachback, by Lacey and myself 2013-15, as a pocket of inefficiency and hesitation in the context of ImPulsTanz Festival Vienna, where “More than 120 internationally renowned teachers and choreographers are heading more than 200 workshops open to beginners, intermediate and professional dancers”

agencies would be the dancer and the dance. Can we dance our intra-actions? Can we dedicate our attention – sensorial, kinetic, intellectual, emotional – and train ourselves to perceive the events we are part of, yet which we can not entirely comprehend? Can we practice what Barad calls response-ability⁴ towards that which we do not grasp? On the base of my examples, I want to posit dancing as an ethical practice of encounter with alterity: dedicating ourselves to the acknowledgement of otherness within our own existence; committing to apprehend it without encroaching on its integrity, without trying to estimate or measure it; engaging in something unqualified or at least that will always exceed whatever we can know of it.

What can it mean, both ethically and practically, to be taken by dance, to attend to dance, to observe / analyse / be interested in dance, as an expression for which we are the medium? Which concrete set-ups can turn dancing into an opportunity to cater to the other in and outside ourselves, to develop an intimacy with alterity as constitutive of our subjectivity, as much as of our relations to the rest of the world?

Generative fictions: pretending, make(oneself) believe, magic

The examples I'm about to present share a sense of fictionality. They are stories dancers tell themselves in order to in-form their own sensory-motor activity, imposing imagined and speculated parameters to their activity, creating demands which they must respond to in order to sustain the fiction. These stories tell of meanings hidden to their messengers or to their recipients, of telepathy and companionship, of devotion and mystery. They set the conditions for dancers to contemplate and intra-act dance's autonomy, its exteriority and the dancer's capacity to sense this exteriority. Because dance always exceeds dancers' comprehension, these fictional propositions also challenge dancers' capacity to be absorbed or taken by, without merging with, an entity that stays alien to them.

The reason for using fiction is not to show that one is pretending, or to display the fakeness in a revelatory gesture, but the aim is to transform oneself and our capacity to perceive, with the help of fiction. If one pretends well enough, to the point of convincing oneself that one experiences the fiction, one is effectively transformed.

4 Barad, Karen. "Touching is a matter of response. Each of 'us' is constituted in response-ability. Each of 'us' is constituted as responsible for the other, as the other." *On Touching—The Inhuman That Therefore I Am* *differences* (2012) 23(3): p.215

Anarchic instructions: le Feedback des Assistantes

MANIFEST(O):

To not choose form on principle

To hang morality

To shake the matter enough but not so much as to free the dogs

FUNCTION:

To feel oneself as solid, important or "statu(t)e towards beauty"

INITIATION FABLE:

the bipolar flea moves in on the crocodile

returning from a hunting party, taken over by dizziness

you climb the swordfish

the angle is against it, despair pricks you

but patience, light-footed, a thousand offerings to the north east

(feedbacks from dancers to their colleagues in Les Assistantes, a performance by Jennifer Lacey & Nadia Lauro (2008))

In Jennifer Lacey's *Les Assistantes* (2008), the performers⁵ took turns dancing solos and giving each other feedback of the most tangential kind. It was a role-play of teachers and student, pretending that one should correct the other, and assigning to these cryptic comments an authority that wouldn't need to prove its own worth. The quotes above hint at the work of interpretation the "students" would need to accomplish: which improvements does the political manifesto suggest? Which moral does the fable give us, which may act as guideline for our further dancing? We practiced this ritual every day during the creation periods, accumulating hints for how to dance and practising dancing with these hints as support and framework. Our dances grew, gaining layer after layer of complexity, without any oversee-able masterplan. The strategy was to turn on our good will to apply all feedback to the dance, even though parameters of quality were somewhat impossible to point out, given the un-coherent and somewhat absurd perspectives given on the same dance by its various viewers. We committed to the incomprehensible and embraced the quasi-absurd (yet not entirely absurd, for the feedback *did* stem from our observation of the dance!) as an initiation into depth and mystery. Through this sustained commitment to digest in movement every feedback received, our dancing accumulated filters of poetry: semantic fields, narrative motifs, syntactical tactics and rhythmic qualities. Shortcutting a coherent logic was a strategy to open more dimensions to the relationship that is our dancing.

5 Alice Chauchat, DD Dorvillier, Audrey Gaisan, Jennifer Lacey, Barbara Manzetti, Sofia Neves

Hidden meanings: Oracle Dance and Rebus Dance

Soon after she created *Les Assistantes*, Jennifer launched TTT. The project grew and transformed along the practices, issues and ideas brought up by each year's participants. In 2013, questions of reading and interpretation became especially important as many of the persons present brought in their practice of reading theory, tarot, and other interpretive systems⁶. Following up on these investigations, *The Oracle Dance* was developed in 2014⁷. One person poses a question to an interpreter. Several dancers dance the oracle (:a cryptic message that demands interpretation), from which the interpreter finds the clues to answer the question in real time. The dancers, ignorant of the question, dance with the awareness that their dance is being read, that it holds a meaning which they do not know themselves. This brings them to strive for an undetermined precision and clarity: to facilitate the projection of a semiotic value onto the dance, without wilfully directing its content. The fact that it is a group dance also shifts the dancers' apprehension of each other as well as of their communal composition. For the message to remain unknown to the oracle dancers, they must avoid logics of representation, conventions that may be too strongly charged with pre-determined meanings. And still they must attend the dance that is being composed, as something "significant" and readable. It is a work of dis-owning and honouring at the same time.

A similar interest in dance's relationship to readability and opacity drove Alix Eynaudi when she created her piece *Edelweiss* (2015). Together with her dancers⁸, Eynaudi created rebus-like dances, or dances that pretended to be rebus, as part of a work in which every element and the overall composition was conceived as one. A rebus is a visual riddle: it is composed of distinct elements, and each element represents an object whose name sounds like a part of the final message. In order to dance like a rebus, we had to create a syntax that would valorise shorter units of movements, treating them as gestures with un-connected but distinct meanings. We were working with the taste, or feel, of signification. Whereas the oracle dance relies on the process of interpretation, the rebus dance is a lure for the audience to engage with the feeling of meaningfulness. It resists reading, and maintains open that gap between sensation and content, as a space for unresolved mystery⁹.

Similar to the Oracle Dance, the dancer's intention in the Rebus Dance is geared towards the possibility of meaning, rather than on its verification. He must blur his own sense of the dance, and dedicate himself exactly to that which is defined as an absence, as the ungraspable. Precision shifts

6 Teachback participants in 2013 were Paula Caspao, Alice Chauchat, Valentina Desideri, Alix Eynaudi, Denise Ferreira da Silva, Keith Hennessy, Jennifer Lacey, Rasmus Ölme and Angela Schubot

7 Teachback participants in 2014 were Alice Chauchat, Valentina Desideri, Alix Eynaudi, Keith Hennessy, Anne Juren, Jennifer Lacey, Mark Lorimer, Raimundas Malašauskas, Philippe Riéra and Mårten Spångberg

8 Cécile Tonizzo, Mark Lorimer and myself

9 "meaningful" might in fact point towards value and importance, rather than to its dis-abled linguistic function.

from the exactitude of a predefined form to the exactness of attention to every passing form, independently from its (dis)similarity to recognizable patterns.

Hosting the Other in Oneself: Telepathic Dance

During and after the 2014 Teachback, I began developing an idea of unmediated transmission through what I first called “puppeteering,” before changing the name to “Telepathic Dance” so as to evacuate misleading considerations about power dynamics. The principle is that the people watching the dance are sending the dance that is being danced by the dancer(s). This is a conceptual fiction, a proposal meant to stimulate a sensorial and relational imaginary. Taking it as a fact, both dancers and watchers go through a process of (dis-)identification. The watchers appropriate the dance as an expression stemming from themselves, and the dancers dis-own the impulses that move them as belonging to someone else. Technically, the dancer's attention is very similar to the one practiced in Authentic Movement in terms of openness and spontaneity. The difference is conceptual, assigning impulses to exteriority rather than interiority. Whereas Authentic Movement posits kinesthesia as a privileged mode of perceiving one's authentic self (Schug, 2010), the Telepathic Dance considers movement as an alien expression that traverses the dancer, and kinesthesia as a mode of perceiving otherness. In both practices, impulses vary from thoughts to sensations, images, memory in the form of habits or pattern, or yet uncategorised somethings. No thought, sensation, image or memory is wholly one person's, and the dancer's response to them is, like every phenomenon, the “inseparability of intra-acting agencies”. Paying attention and responding to the impulses that traverse us, allowing them to move us, is a practice in response-ability. Paying attention and accepting authorship for the dance we're watching also means being response-able for what is happening, as a committed actor of the event. It means that *we* are responsible for *that*, together, and we'll have to bear the consequences together, without ever being able to calculate each one's share.

Sensing distance & intimacy within oneself and with others: Dance of Companionship

Parallel to the Telepathic Dance, I've also been dancing the *Dance of Companionship*, both on and offstage, but mostly in studios together with other dancers. The basic premise is to dance in order to keep oneself company and to keep the dance company. Inspired by the ancient work of lady's companions, it is a practice of separating and attending. Observing the companionship between dance and the dancer's sensations (tactile, kinetic, visual, auditory), between dance and the dancer's thoughts, between dance and the movement's forms, the score gradually undoes the coherence

between dance and every element one knows as being part of dance, or part of the experience of dancing. It opens a series of questions: if dance is not what I perceive, not the way I move, not what I imagine with my body, then what is dance? This process increases the dancer's attention to the various impressions constituting her activity, at the same time as it establishes distance between these and the dance. As she focuses with ever more detail on her experience, dance as companion of that experience continuously moves away as that which exceeds the dancer's own doings¹⁰. Dance is a horizon and a companion; a partner that remains unknown, whose unknowability obliges and displaces.

Interspersed with the list of actions/perceptions that keep company to the dance, when I guide the dance of Companionship I describe narrative figures like lady's companion, nurse, toddlers, or hikers, as a support to speculate on the quality of the relationship between dance and all these elements. These figures hint at companionship as a skill, at quasi-equality, readiness and availability, atmospheric presence rather than direct interaction, and at falling in- and out-of synch while treading different grounds. Across these, companionship appears as an unobtrusive co-presence, whereby each companion is self-determined yet attentive to the other, acknowledging and allowing the other to change oneself in a subterranean way. It is a chance to value and contemplate reciprocal transformation, intra-action, without trying to measure it. To posit it as a mystery we can honour.

Conclusion

The assistants's feedback, the oracle letting itself be read without reading itself, the rebus exhaling the smell of meaning without delivering any, the telepath being traversed by a foreign dance, the companion attending to an entity with which she can't identify: all these scores establish intruders as characters in their fiction, demanding that the dancers welcome an alien entity into their own activity, as constitutive part of it. What is not known is as important as what is known, and otherness as much part of our selves as what we usually identify with. The strangeness of these tasks calls for a leap of faith: the dancers need to accept that they do not quite know; on the other hand they also must believe that there is something to understand, and that they do know something, even though this is difficult to precisely pin down. The tone of mystery these fictions entail, the share they make for the unrecognised, turns their performance into a sensorial and conceptual speculation. They demand that the dancer develops other solutions than control, rationalisation and separation in sealed categories: rather, commitment, curiosity, consideration and

¹⁰ In "action in Perception" (2004), Alva Noë presents perception as an act. I follow here his proposition to include sensation and thoughts as part of the dancer's actions.

empathy as well as the humorous acceptance to be stupid without letting go of inquisitiveness. As fictions, they invite pretending as a trigger of intuition, calling in skills we might not know we have. As poetic proposals, they transport a complex of information for a social, or relational, sensation¹¹: insofar as the dancer considers herself both part of and in relation to something other (the dance, the group, another dancer, a thought etc.), these fictions in-form the quality of these relationships, and hence, the dancer himself. Finally, these scores situate dance as a symptom, an emanation, of more than we can know: of alive, dynamic and engaged entanglements.

¹¹ Joan Skinner developed an elaborate use of poetic images as conveyors of information in dance class, replacing analytical descriptions of body and movement : “... in Skinner Releasing Technique the image serves as the carrier of a patterned whole of information -- a metaphor for kinesthetic knowledge -- which "formulates a new conception for our direct imaginative grasp," and this metaphor is apprehended intuitively rather than analytically.”