

Embryology as Choreography

ISABELLE SCHAD

When the body and its materiality becomes the work itself and the work itself becomes experience and process, the question of generation – and the question of looking into the future – become relative to the complex interdependencies between the making of work and the mechanisms of production. Thus the pertinence of re-inventing our practices and re-considering the finished by putting the emphasis on continuous learning processes may be disturbed or challenged.

Thinking about the ‘Next Generation,’ the first question that came to my mind was whether interest in the body and its visibility is specific to a generation. The second was, why are we looking into the future? In considering the work (on the body and its movements) by artists and choreographers around the Judson Dance Theatre, such as Yvonne Rainer, Trisha Brown, Carolee Schneemann, Anna Halprin, Steve Paxton, Simone Forti, Deborah Hay and many others, or painters such as Francis Bacon¹, writers and practitioners working in the fields of theory, philosophy and many other disciplines (related to the body), I began to formulate other questions:

Does the awareness of ideas and concepts generated by numerous people in numerous domains in recent years repre-

1 I'm going to stop quoting people here, as it is unclear where to start and where to end: the notion of the generational explodes into small pieces so easily.

sent a generation of investigators in the field of contemporary choreography? If the phenomenon of awareness suggests social change, then we are talking about a cultural movement rooted in time? Can we also talk about a next generation in dance, or about a new one? Or conversely, are we rather witnessing a popularization and institutional recognition of concepts that many artists have been defending individually for decades?²

And then: Where am I talking from? What is my position as part of the present generation and what is the desired ‘next,’ the things we are not yet aware of? And if we do not know yet what is going to come how can we talk about it?

I remember well the day of the Panel, which was just three days before the premiere of my recent group piece *Musik (Practicable)* in Berlin. I also remember the energy I was putting into not following the agenda of the announcement, the promises one is obliged to fulfill within the context of writing an application and the expectation this creates (that this work/piece should conform to the announcement). I remember trying not to fall into the trap of making the piece conform to the announcement, as this would mean – paradoxically – to be caught in the past as if the piece was already completed at the time of the announcement.

So, in a way – and this is at least a starting point for having my own perspective on the ‘next generation’ – I could eventually talk about my current experiences and attempts at looking

2 The notion that there is nothing *new* – that is we are not discovering new things but rather create concepts – if there is something *new* or singular in a work – is it then the *creating* of a concept with sincerity that comes from within? And it is therefore about the *person* behind, becoming a question of *personal process or work*.

for the potential within what is usually considered the end of a process just before a premiere.

I could begin by talking about my work on forgetting what I know already, on strategies of re-discovering an experience rather than repeating the predominant images the body remembers, on daring not to polish the work, or ‘fix’ it in any other way, but rather slide between the present and the near future, where we can be connected to an un-known space; where we can indulge the joyful creativity emerging within a working process (even if it is supposedly towards an *ending* of the process) once we no longer feel obliged to ‘finish.’ In a way, this desire to stay in a process whilst heading towards a premiere, including all the difficulties and psychological phenomena coming with the increased pressure, is closely connected to my interests in the body, my ways of working, and how I would like to share my work with others.

ON CELLS, PRACTICE AND CHOREOGRAPHY

What happens in the process of choreographing a public presentation?

In my work, I am looking for answers in somatic practices such as Body-Mind-Centering, which was developed by Bonnie Bainbridge-Cohen. The emphasis here is on the perceptions and sensations of one’s body – towards understanding who we are by understanding our past processes, and how we are by embodying physiological or embryological processes.

And it is by understanding where we are coming from that we understand our present selves and space; as in very early embryological developments, everything is about space: location is the important factor.

Since we are created by our own space as well as by our process, the body becomes the space and simultaneously the place where space and time coincide. The origins of movement are in the body and its becoming itself. Each single cell has its (own) double membrane: one looking to the inside, the other facing the outside. This may be the origin of all interior/exterior dialectics. We re-member our membranes through our own memory and we re-member what informs a structure by studying and embodying cellular processes (cellular communication, division, differentiation, migration of cells, cellular membranes and fluid). If re-membering past processes of our first cells gives us information about who/how/where we are, it also in-forms us about our environment and how we create our own environment through (cellular) relationships.

Applying this approach to choreography means questioning its form – looking at what in-forms the form. Re-membrance not only becomes a meditation, but a work on the membrane itself: permeable and ever-changing, membranes and spaces get drawn to the inside, folded, becoming again the outside. Invagination and rebound, inside becoming outside: fluid processes becoming structures. Endoderm, ectoderm and mesoderm become all the structures – all the body systems of our present body.

This understanding of the (moving) body is based on both experience and process. When such processes become choreography, the choreography is based on both experience and a working process. If the choreography is based on score-writing, like a partition in music, the body then becomes the music (the voice) – and the score indicates how to re-find the experience and the process in *present* time, producing a *presentation*. Along the way within a creative process the writing of the score is enriched, becomes more and more complex

and precise in relation to (inner/outer) space, initiation of movement, rhythm (time), intensity, etc.

In my current project *Musik (Practicable)*, the score I wrote serves as a timeline and consists of graphics/drawings that give information about space and time, and about where in the body movement is initiated. It also works as an additional text document where those descriptions are formulated more explicitly. The fourteen dancers, who are at the same time co-choreographers, produce this text within the process. They make notes and write about their own perceptions of inner/outer space, their body experiences, their strategies, the impact and influences they gain from their environment. Step by step, the score becomes more like a piece of writing itself, which has its own logic, almost like a poem, from which everyone can nourish her/himself in her/his own way. Therefore the dancing of the piece may become a meditation on the score as well as a piece of writing that helps the performer to be in present time whilst meeting an audience. The audience provides feedback to the performer about her/his activity, which in turn informs the score, which may be re-written after this experience.

Which words might describe those bodies and (body) images that emerge if those bodies and images are beyond what we know already, what we recognize as known images; beyond dance style, narratives, symbols or representation? Or could the movement itself be the meaning? The body as the meaning, similar to the body as the medium dealing with and as its movement. What/who moves while seeing? Can seeing be beyond action? What happens to the body of the spectator in the 'act' of watching?

The described approach of writing dance whilst focusing on the body as a medium and on (somatic) body practice(s) has recently become more contemporary. There seems to be a

need to re-define principles and concerns that have already been negotiated in relation to the movement of the Judson Dance Theatre. It is a movement *back to the body and back to dance*, which I happen to be part of myself, following choreographies that were dominated by conceptual dance from the 1990s onwards.

The difficulty is to avoid, within a movement towards common interests, the exploitation of notions that create tendencies rather than a movement. As a way to reflect upon present tendencies, politics and mechanisms of production, I may formulate the question: What could happen if mechanisms of production did not (too often) prevent it from becoming?

ON EMPTYING OUT WORDS AND CURRENT TENDENCIES IN DANCE AND PERFORMANCE

The mechanisms are the locus of all the contradictions in making work and presenting it. Related notions such as open space, practice-orientated work, work-in-progress, process versus product, collective work, networking, collaboration intermingle, so that intention and reality rarely fit together anymore.

Indeed those notions are the ones everyone is working around and in, but through the development of a market around these notions it is impossible *not* to mention them as part of your work anymore. They become both: a reality of working and a fertile ground for misunderstanding and commercial instrumentalism, in which meaning is lost. Within the market of presentation, those notions are much promoted but often without any (of its original) meaning.

The ‘market’ doesn’t really value the work of artists that resist the lie(s). If the main reasons for a piece being presented or not, for being part of dance festivals or not, are still name, size of production/money involved and/or agreement on consensual curating, as applied by many of those who run the market, it may be hard to resist and not play the game. Here the notion of ‘next generation’ unfortunately becomes valid again in a not very interesting context, or shall we say contest?

It is therefore not only about finding truthful solutions for how to work with each other without anybody losing her/his body of work, but also about discovering strategies to transform and resist the conditions of the market. Taking the specific case of collaborations in the field of dance/performance into account, collaborations often end up becoming one person’s artistic property. Everybody involved works only for this personal property. If the same process comes from several individual processes that interconnect and nobody loses her/his own body of work, we could do away with the notion of *working for* and start to speak about *working with*, and therefore imagine a real meeting.

ON TRYING TO RESIST

Having co-initiated several work structures/groups such as *Good Work* (2003) and *Practicable* (2005)³ over the last 10 years, and having looked for ways to organize ourselves, to

3 Both work structures have a similar attempt proposing ways of working that are non-hierarchical; ‘Practicable’ with a focus on body practice, ‘Good Work’ on practices coming from different fields, both of them deal with modalities of working and thinking (together) and their effects on (re)presentation. Cf.: www.isabelle-schad.net and www.practicable.info.

work together (collaboration has been a ‘real’ topic), explore different possibilities of functioning within groups of artists working in the field of dance, I now look back on our initial intentions and realize that I now avoid using certain terms, such as networking, collaboration, horizontal work structure, for the reasons mentioned above; these expressions have been emptied of their original meaning. How do we wish to defend them and put them into practice?

I would like to thank everyone I have met and from whom I have learned in this search to understand how best to work together. Two recent encounters, in particular, helped me to realize the extent to which cooperation can be implicit in a practice.

It was through my work with Laurent Goldring and the research on our pieces *Unturtled* (in 2007) that the work on the image as an organ became an ongoing process. By separating our working practices as much as possible, to avoid mingling one medium into the other, we attempted to understand how far this parallel work on body, image and representation informs us about the ‘truth’ of an image that becomes an organ of the body and not a representation of the whole. As we approached completion of a first presentation (of one of the pieces), I began to understand the relativity and the meaning of *(un)finishing*.

Bonnie Bainbridge-Cohen’s workshops on embryology helped me discover the potentials in the *how and what*: how to work and what to say with it. A practice that makes people form, for example, a social organization from within makes a big difference: a social organization or community as a truthful experience that becomes a real encounter.

Giving workshops has become a major part of my work and an opportunity to deal with *(un)finishing* again. In every workshop I am astonished how easily people connect through

a practice: cells are relational, as *we* are apparently, once we connect back to where things originate from. I am surprised how a group of people forms, as if the people had been working together forever. Simultaneously, every person remains a subject within the group. Subjectivity does indeed have a self, and practicing subjectivity within a group might be considered a utopian form of being together.

I am also continually astonished by how much people like each other. Dancing and dancing together becomes a pleasure. This very archaic and deep pleasure is located in the body.

To be able to propose a counterpoint to the world's daily competition, power/ego-problems or wars, by sharing experience-based work and knowledge of the body/dance with all kinds of people in contrast to selected groups of people was one thing. Realizing that this way of working from body to consciousness and vice versa brings back the potential for the body/dance to be a site of resistance, as much as for an emerging community (to be a site for resistance) was another. It was, perhaps, the most important discovery of my long and not yet finished struggle to reconcile my own process with the production mechanisms we are confronted with. It is there that I find the potential for surprise, even though the concepts are perhaps not new. Yet they need to be re-invented and re-discovered as new, over and over again. Here lies the difference between a practice and a technique, between practice and repetition, between practicing and rehearsing. Practice as a sharing of knowledge is becoming a place that allows us to (re)think the body.

Transmission of information is a function of our nervous system that allows us to form responses and not just reactions. My work is not about transmitting information as a teacher does. It is about sharing experience and allowing people to learn from each other. It is about bringing knowledge and ex-

perience together. This is where writing practice and body practice meet and nourish each other. It is an internal form of learning rather than an external one. Giving back pleasure to the body of the performer. The spectator. The dance. The image. The text. The unknown. The next.