

What score? Pre-choreography and post-choreography

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Abstract

This article introduces a brief historical reflection on the current reception or production of dance and ‘choreographic objects’ in venues of documentation/exhibition (museum) and experimentation (laboratory), reviewing the curatorial direction of ‘Move: Choreographic You’ (Hayward Gallery) and Xavier Le Roy's ‘Retrospective’ (Fundació Antoni Tàpies). Previewing the artists’ writings in this issue of *IJPADM*, the author then comments on some of the key terms in the current ‘mobilization of the term choreography’, emphasizing the remarkable interdisciplinary expansion of dance research and the concerted efforts that are under way to document, analyse, display and propel choreographic processes and languages to a much wider audience, thus also making available a diverse range of unique methods of scoring, recording, teaching and conceptualizing movement within an expanding international culture of performance and mediated arts (with the role of online dance platforms and archives gaining an ever greater significance).

Keywords

exhibition

laboratory

choreographic object

publishing

dance research

post-choreography

We live in a changing world of dance, and the level of discourse regarding dance and choreographic practices has been raised considerably compared to the mid or late twentieth century. Dance research has established itself as a viable discipline in the university; moreover, research into dance composition and documentation is also conducted by the practitioners themselves, to an extent that justifies Scott deLahunta's comprehensive vision of a new 'dance literature' exploring also various 'non-linguistic forms of description and collateral knowledge relations drawn together by the artists/researchers' (2013). The *mobilization of the term choreography*, projected as the special theme of this issue of *IJPADM*, can be considered on the upswing, and the many contributions assembled here testify to the negotiations under way – a deep questioning process reaching into many areas surrounding composition, pedagogy and training, scoring, publishing and dissemination, curating, knowledge transfer, documentation, oral history, reinterpretation of historic repertoire and socially/culturally situated choreography.

In the current era of dance production, experimentation and research, two facets have joined our reception of the 'object of performance' (Sayre 1989) that I wish to begin

with: the museum and the laboratory. After a brief overview of events I observed in the past years, regarding both exhibition and collective research processes, I will reflect on the question of the 'score' and the implications of thinking through pre-choreography and post-choreography as they are so provocatively suggested in the present journal, with a particular focus on the five practitioner contributions I was sent to comment on.

Museums have recently discovered the performing arts in ways not really imaginable a few decades ago, and quite frequently visitors are now invited to enter exhibition spaces that host live performance or install participatory environments in which performers, objects and audiences enter into choreographic exchanges. This trend is reflected by the Guggenheim's featuring of Marina Abramovic's *Seven Easy Pieces* in 2005, followed by the long-duration Abramovic ritual of 'The Artist is Present' (MoMA, 2010) and the Whitney Museum's two-part 'Off the Wall' (2010), with Part 1 displaying an installation of actions using the body in live performance, in front of the camera, or in relation to photography and drawing, and Part 2 featuring seven works by the Trisha Brown Dance Company from the 1960s and 1970s, the historical era that initially witnessed the vibrant crossover avant-garde context for the works exhibited in 'Off the Wall Part 1'.

Earlier instances include, for example, 'Out of Actions: Between Performance and the Object, 1949–1979', staged at the Museum of Contemporary Arts, Los Angeles, in 1998, and 'Outside the Frame: Performance and the Object', a smaller exhibit at the Cleveland Center for Contemporary Art in Ohio (1994), both shows interestingly using the term 'performance object' to refer to preservable traces of the live event. Theatre and dance

programmes had been offered at the Centre Pompidou, the Walker Art Center, the Wexner Center and contemporary art museums in Chicago, Houston and elsewhere; on occasion dance events were invited into new media arts manifestations at ZKM in Germany or YCAM in Japan. And without doubt numerous art galleries across the world, from Barcelona to São Paulo, and from Montréal to Beijing's underground spaces at the 798 Factory, brought dance into contact with the visual arts, especially since the growth of dance-on-camera festivals had made an impact on a widening international network – a network that now has a vast distributed presence through the dance-tech.net platform and the archives of the dance screen festivals.

But it was 'Move: Choreographing You' at the Hayward Gallery (London, 2010) that caught my attention since this exhibition claimed to be one of the first shows involving the audience directly in the experience of 'choreographic objects' – soliciting them to touch materials (e.g. Lygia Clark's relational objects), carry out propositions, move around and play on a 'set' (Mike Kelley's *Test Room Containing Multiple Stimuli Known to Elicit Curiosity and Manipulatory Responses*), hang in Simone Forti's ropes or climb through William Forsythe's large installation of gymnastic rings suspended at varying heights from the ceiling (*The Fact of Matter*). Many of these installations did not necessarily involve a choreographic score to be performed but offered spatial, physical–sensorial or conceptual challenges, whether it meant walking sideways through Bruce Nauman's narrow *Green Light Corridor*, crawling through Clark's *The House is the Body*, or trying to discern, with 3D glasses, a futuristic computational artwork of cascading, floating imagery (OpenEnded Group, *Stairwell*) which traces Wayne

McGregor's movements by nearly dissolving the human form into perplexing galaxies of light pixels, lava streams of a body without body, sinewy grids whirling through a holographic cosmos.¹



Figure 1: Xavier Le Roy, 'Retrospective', Fundació Antoni Tàpies, Barcelona, 2012. Photo: Linda Valdés. Courtesy of FAT.

Xavier Le Roy's 'Retrospective' at Fundació Antoni Tàpies (Barcelona, 2012), is different, more thought-provoking and paradoxical, as it proposes to stage something unpredictable, a long-durational process of recasting/remembering/reperforming Le Roy's work – acted out live by sixteen performers – in the large upstairs gallery (see Figure 1), giving over the choreographic tracings and rememberings to dancers who embody Le Roy's solos and group pieces for the visitors, interpreting the 'scores' in real time over a period of months, meeting and conversing with visitors, inviting them to a

dark room downstairs where they can manipulate two representations of the human body made out of tissue and styrofoam. Pertinent to the themes discussed in this journal, this exhibition proposed to investigate new discourses specific to dance/choreography, but also to the curatorial remit, challenging us to connect a body of work to research processes and reinterpretation-as-production, i.e. approaching specific structures and strategies of performance disconnected from subjectivist bodily expression, style and representation – re-transforming them from a set of protocols or tools used in order to produce something predetermined (a dance) to an open cluster of tools that can be used in a generic capacity for both public observation/analysis and production.



Figure 2: Xavier Le Roy, ‘Retrospective’, Fundació Antoni Tàpies, Barcelona, 2012.
Photo: Linda Valdés. Courtesy of FAT.

So now is a good time to ask, what is a score, and how do we imagine such co-choreographic processes that are also receptions and transformations of original material? How does the performer-mediator (at Fundació Antoni Tàpies) or the visitor (at Hayward Gallery) act out choreographic objects or how do we re-imagine models and contexts for research or exhibition – and Emio Greco's *Double Skin/Double Mind* and William Forsythe/OSU's *Synchronous Objects*, along with the current Motion Bank Project, immediately come to mind – when in fact the interpreter is free to assemble, to manipulate the material or the memory. What exactly is being remembered?²

Let me conclude this opening with another impression gained recently at Houston's Contemporary Art Museum, where the exhibition 'Radical Presence: Black Performance in Contemporary Art' was accompanied, on weekends, by live performances. I witnessed Benjamin Patterson, the well-known Fluxus artist, restage an older 'score' from 1962, titled *Pond*. The original score was on exhibition in a glass box – a drawing with a set of instructions. Such instructions formed an important aspect of the 1960s Judson Dance era and the Happening, Fluxus and Conceptual art movements. On 5 January 2013, this older score was recreated into a lively sound/word performance voiced by young local performers along with small sound toys (frogs) they released onto a checker-board diagram painted on the floor. Patterson was 'conducting', but more in the role of a silent observer. The audience enjoyed it thoroughly. In a discussion I had with other artists, someone argued that they had not encountered this model in the visual arts, perhaps because in the museum the emphasis is generally on the material artefact – there is no score. I responded by suggesting there is always a score, in all artistic practices and in all

contexts where art is exhibited/performed. We intuit or figure it out somehow through our cultural or poetic imagination, inferring how an object performs in an exhibition, recognizing vocabularies and genre conventions, and the framing etiquette that is created for the reception of an enactment of 'choreography'. We look for and listen into the resonances of structure and form, how articulations can touch us and make meaningful the experience of sculptural plasticity, of still image, gesture, sound or music, word and movement.

But is it helpful to claim such a wide and encompassing viewpoint on composition (and how was it possible that William Forsythe's notion of the 'choreographic object' gained such currency)? Was this a strategic renaming? Indeed, what if choreography is a kind of writing with the body, as Raimund Hoghe suggests? What if choreography is whatever happens to you, while you are moving, dancing and watching dance? What if it is a tool for transformable ideas? Or an accumulation of conscious and unconscious choices? The questions asked by the students working with Jeanine Durning and Liz Waterhouse make perfect sense to me, since they touch upon fundamental human empathies of reception and reflection. [Artaud](#) once said that the theatre of cruelty does not mean blood or violence; it means a theatre that is difficult and cruel for ourselves first of all (2010: 57). This cruel exactitude I have come to expect from practices that for the past two decades have crossed many boundaries, integrated digital technologies into research and production, and found laboratory environments conducive to interdisciplinary and dialectic enquiries into its principles of articulation. In my own experience, the encounter between dance and technologies generated changes in methodologies; transdisciplinary

collaboration between artists, scientists, technicians and scholars became vital for peer-to-peer research and development models that have sustained an ever-growing network of practitioners operating in small (or larger, international) aggregations, performance ensembles, workshop or university contexts alike.

With such a widening of the interface systems (and data banks) of performance, the original meaning of ‘score’ (referring to music or dance notation) has been transformed. When Bertha Bermúdez speaks of cognitive maps and pre-choreographic materials, she is thinking of numerous generative and modifying concepts that function like a moving language (glossary) helping dancers – and audiences as well – to unlock the entanglements of body and words. We are also reminded that choreographers speak (and Pina Bausch’s question-and-answer rehearsals are a fascinating case, too). Such disentanglement perhaps lies at the bottom of deLahunta’s proposition for ‘publishing’ dance, namely creating a wider public recognition through a [heterogeneous](#) ‘literature’ of the in-forming ideas, architectures, design and movement principles or diverse techniques shaping the evolving artefacts of physical intelligence – systems devised for organizing raw and refined materials by choreographers such as William Forsythe, Deborah Hay, Emio Greco, Myriam Gourfink, Jonathan Burrows, Siobhan Davies, Wayne McGregor, Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker and others.

Organization, notation and invention of movement involve a physical intelligence both embodied and intellectual, drawing in fact, as the editors point out, on a vastly enlarged framework of understanding dance practice in its sensory and sense-making modalities,

its aesthetic and sociocultural powers to probe and affect the human imagination, and further our knowledge about body–mind, expression, agency and the impact of ‘compositional forces’ (Doruff 2009: 131). Take Carol Brown’s dance work *Revolve*, for example, and glance at the intricate score that reads like a filmic story-board or script complete with various ‘tracks’ indicating the sound, video, dramaturgical, choreographic and interactive dimensions of a performance that – Alvin Lucier’s classic *Music for Solo Performer* comes to mind – begins with ‘desynchronous brain wave activity’ and delves into ‘chronobiology’, inner rhythms of body consciousness. Paradoxically, following my grasp of Lucier’s work with brain waves, the action of the brain cannot of course be choreographed. Rather, the effects of the brain waves on sounding happen precisely when involuntary movement might become part of translocal (butterfly) affects in a distributed configuration of instruments, where unconscious interplays evolve into content/expression of the dis/organized and the abstract, ‘riding the edges of sleep like a somnambulist’ (Brown).

Myriam Van Imschoot, recording conversations – ‘interview affairs’ – with choreographers and artists for her Oral Site ‘What’s the Score?’ project (<http://www.oralsite.be>), speaks of the ‘zombie effect’ or the third element that might occur when listening to practitioners weaving (with the interviewer) ‘mental verbal landscapes of interaction’. I take it that she means the recorder, listening to someone organizing their material process of composition, is at the same time reincarnating and ‘moving’ the traces of that which is being recorded, retrospectively into a future (potential, re-improvisatory co-composition) choreography of interaction. Such choreographic

process, whether in dance or in language, is not prescriptive; it does not formalize any steps to lock them into phrases that are repeated. Even precise instructions for tasks (algorithms) are not locked or determined but can be re-mobilized, comparable to the ‘infecting’ of *real time documentation* Durning and Waterhouse describe. This unlocking, in fact, was one of the points I was trying to make when suggesting we do not work with finite productions in today’s real time interactive dance environments, but always already with differentiated, post-choreographic systems (Birringer 2008) that are inherently unstable, asynchronous and permeable. When Deborah Hay speaks of her score for *O, O (Room)*, mentioning how a French cast of dancers learnt it from the solo she taught (and moved from ‘complete conformity to complete anarchy’), she insists on a complex process of how the dance moves from a solo to a group piece and how she wanted to preserve an ending that is completely spontaneous (Goldman 2007: 159). She works with oral directives that indicate timing and spatial patterns, and yet she maintains that ‘once you are in place, begin the practice of choosing to surrender the pattern of facing a single direction...’ (Goldman 2007: 162). Her trust in the (un)conscious flow of multiple perceptual occurrences unfolding continuously strikes me as a beautiful introduction to the provocative findings published in this journal by deLahunta and Whatley. These findings, I surmise, always tend to oscillate between the pre-choreographic, for example ideas, beliefs, concepts and, as Gourfink explains, something as fundamental as breathing or Yoga techniques that she combines with Kinetography Laban and computer music to build her own creative ‘scoring’ system, and the retrospective understanding or remediation (Van Imschoot) of the performative material and the working instruments.

While admiring the exactitude of these five specific contributions and the far-reaching propositions made in the remainder of this journal issue, I also on occasion wonder about the immense growth of data, discourses, documents and moving subjects/objects that are being generated, and from a curatorial or archival point of view, I think the widening of publishing creativity will reach limits. The effect of a networked/distributed dance culture or literacy (via social media, YouTube, online platforms, blogs and publications) as a sustainable contribution to communal knowledge is yet untested, and Van Imschoot notes the irony at the gates of restoration/preservation and critical nostalgia when imagining web-based workplaces for artistic research as ‘unstable environments’ for ‘fragile, ephemeral material’. We do not know where the enormous amount of motion bank data on (pre/post)choreographic processes will migrate, in 40 or 60 years’ time, which guardians will manage the information once traditions of in-body teaching (as we know them from centuries of practice in kathakali, noh, kabuki and ballet) become defamiliarized, and who amongst our extended public families will study the data. Yet, without doubt, our present generation of artists and researchers, poet-athletes of body and soul, inspires a profound confidence (more Whitman than Kafka) into multitudinous possibilities of the scores that might choreograph you.

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Notes

¹ For an expanded critique of this exhibition, see J. Birringer (2011) and Nicole Haitzinger's 'Dramaturgie im zeitgenössischen Tanz' (in Roeder and Zehelein 2011: 86–95). For the transdisciplinary growth of dance and dance-technology research-practices over the past two decades, see Scott deLahunta's numerous publications, and my writing on dance/laboratories (Birringer 2009); for complex examples of diverse disciplinary responses to *Synchronous Objects*, see for example Turk (2011) and Manning (2009).

² Myriam Van Imschoot/Tom Engels/Kristien Van den Brande's 'What's the Score' (Publications on Scores and Notations in Dance) on Oral Site generates an online platform for 'new formats of text orality, visuality, graphicality, temporality, performativity'. In this context, similarly vibrant and related investigations into choreography and dramaturgy (cf. Haitzinger in Roeder and Zehelein 2011), must be mentioned, for example the 'What is choreography?' (2009) survey initiated by the online CORPUS magazine. The wide-ranging responses, introduced by Nicole Haitzinger, are available at: <http://www.corpusweb.net/archivzunge-10.html>. In terms of curatorial practice, it is also noteworthy that dance festivals now generally include symposia that reflect on new discourses in dance research; likewise, producing venues and organizations like Tanzquartier Wien include theoretical investigations into their programming (led by Krassimira Kruschkova) and since 2011 publish them under the title *Scores* (<http://www.tqw.at/de/scores>). For the interdisciplinary project *Choreographic Objects: Traces and artefacts of physical intelligence*, funded by the AHRC 'Beyond Text' research initiative, see <http://projects.beyondtext.ac.uk/choreographicobjects/index.php>.