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CHOREOGRAPHY AS FORM AS DANCE AS AN ACTIVITY

At a conference entitled *(Precise) Woodstock of Thinking,* hosted by Tanzquartier Vienna between 2008 and 2009, Bojana Cvejić in her talk "We don´t have money, so we have to think" raised several important questions: "How to plug in affect (or movement of thought) as a variation in the capacity to change in one´s body, to increase the awareness of this potential, and to focus and act upon it? How to experiment on the level of everyday life by composing one´s experience and by acting with the movement of thought?" (Cvejić 2009: 38). Cvejić asked these questions in the wake of the so-called *affective turn*.[1)] This turn was initiated by philosophers like Brian Massumi or Erin Manning. It marked a departure from what were rather text-centered performative theories, such as that advanced by Judith Butler. Butler's approach soon became common currency and had a very strong impact during the late 1990s. During the 1990s, perhaps as part of several strategies aimed at slowing down the boom of the 1980s (when companies such as *La La La Human Steps* were accelerating bodies and their motions alike), a discursivation of the body and its activity took place in the field of dance in analogy to *speech acts*. This analogy was very necessary to help dance become more intellectual and self-reflexive. But it also made it difficult to think about bodies outside the cultural and ideological grids capturing them. Two additional assumptions go hand in hand with this approach: first, that all bodily movements are written from the perspective of their performers; and second, that these movements are read from the perspective of their observers. *What can a body do?* The answer to this famous Spinozian question with regard to a body being understood in terms of language is that it can parody the grid, subvert the discourses, and write singularily. In some pieces performed in the 1990s, including those mislabelled as "conceptual dance" by their critics and above all those choreographed by Jérôme Bel, the body therefore often moved through already codified spaces of culture and ideology, but it rarely created new concepts of what it can do.

While at that time a young generation of choreographers had recently begun to enter international stages and festivals in order to challenge modernism´s various legacies, dance was no longer conceived as (pure) movement and as composed of naturally expressive bodily qualities. On the contrary, like other art forms

1) "Affect is born in *in-between-ness* and resides as accumulative *beside-ness*. Affect can be understood then as a gradient of bodily capacity – a supple incrementalism of ever-modulating force-relations – that rises and falls not only along various rhythms and modalities of encounter but also through the throughs and sieves of sensation and sensibility, an incrementalism that coincides with belonging to comportments of matter of virtually any and every sort." (Seigworth/Gregg 2010:2)

in previous decades, pieces such as Bel´s *The Last Performance* (1998) or *Xavier Le Roy* (2000) instead conceptualized the body as a practice that not only involved linguistic aspects, but was initially also regarded *as* a linguistic practice. At the time, choreography´s critique of institutions, and here we might paraphrase Benjamin Buchloh´s observations with regard to the visual arts, was often interwoven with a certain aesthetics of administration. (Buchloh 1990: 105-143). Howsoever: the language that dance was enabled to "speak" within this framework, which evidently amounted to quite a daring analogy, was deduced from performative iterations of pre-existing *norms:* the logos to be decentered in Derrida, discourse in general in Foucault's early work (that is, before he discovered biopolitics as an entirely different formation of power and knowledge), and, as we all know, the famous heterosexual matrix in Butler. Dance, then, was considered a bodily activity that was merely derivative. Further, this activity was defined by external norms, which were imposed upon this activity by choreography as an already existing form and by its various components: metaphorically speaking, writing and its letters; literally speaking, positions, poses, extensive movements, and steps.



// Abbildung 01
Mette Ingvartsen, Jefte van Dintha: It´s in the Air 2008

If we consider the several historical legacies of "choreography" since Thoinot Arbeau´s and Raoul-Auger Feuillet´s *Orchesographies* (published in 1589 and 1700 respectively), then we are reminded of what the latter´s treatise states about dancing as an act of writing: "Dancing is composed of Positions, Steps, Sinkings, Risings, Springings, Capers, Fallings, Slidings, Turnings of the Body, Cadence or Time, Figures, & c" (2007[1700]: 1). In comparison to Feuillet´s *normative* poetics, the experience of writing bodies, not only metaphorically but indeed literally, and thereby rejecting the universal command to *just move,* was reflected at the height of semiology during the late 1990s. This occurred although some thinkers, such as André Lepecki, soon criticized the dominance of poststructuralist models and inverted matters. For Lepecki, dance was something entirely different to a mere derivation from a norm

and from a choreographical grammar as the condition of possibility of bodily activities. In Lepecki's eyes, moreover, choreography first and foremost is an *apparatus of capture* that detaches bodies both from what they can do and from their indefinite potential (Lepecki 2007).

Following this line of argument, Petra Sabisch's doctoral dissertation *Choreographing Relations* recently suggested prioritizing virtual relations and intensive movements of affective bodies and then imagining the actual terms and positions as their derivations. In contrast to *extensive* movements, which connect already established points in space and bring us from A to B and from pose to pose, *intensive* movements provoke an affective modification of the body's structure, its components, and its capacity to act. Such movements modify the body's internal relations and its relatedness to a given environment as much as they may transform the environment itself: this recent tendency in contemporary dance practices is clearly illustrated by *It´s in the Air* (2008), a piece co-created by Mette Ingvartsen and Jefta van Dinther and first performed at PACT Zollverein in Essen.

From the beginning, as soon as they enter the stage and climb onto two huge trampolines—and even when they are performing poses like sitting, kneeling, or resting—the performers' bodies are virtually where they are not actually. Their jumping is not synchronized, there are always tiny shifts in-between, and different temporalities proceed independently, thus establishing various bodily qualities and different ways of moving up into the air and down onto the trampoline again. Although the piece is structured by clearly divided sequences, within each it is left open how exactly they are related and how the intensity of each performer´s jumping is affected by and affects her fellow performer. Subliminal qualities circulate *between* the bodies of the performers. What happens to us as spectators is that a specific togetherness is created, a shared space and time not of kinaesthetic involvement, but of belonging to the qualitative *trans*formations in-between. Indeed, the whole spatial environment seems to bounce up and down while we are watching the piece, although we do not mimetically identify with a specific body but rather with what is *not* happening. Most strikingly, it seems as if we are more involved at those moments of dwelling in the air, stretched in-between gravity and drift, than when we follow the continuously varying hops, leaps, and skips. A paradoxical physicality is produced by the looped movement phrases, which take place within the frame of continuous variation.

Van Dinther and Ingvartsen shift from vertical levels to horizontal ones, and back. They always change the extent of the rebound effect. Then, there are the turning points, at which two opposing forces come together: one draws the bodies up, the other presses them back down onto the trampolines again. Especially at those moments it seems as if the bodies on stage were everywhere at the same time. Then it seems as if they remain standing in the air.

What Ingvartsen calls *transdance* (which also connotes *transduction* and *transversality*) is a specific bodily condition. This state is constituted by the looped patterns and attributed to one continuous movement, which is embedded in and transgresses itself through time.[2)] What does this tell us about the conception of bodies in *It´s in the Air,* in contrast to the often semiotically defined bodies appearing in the early works of Jérôme Bel or Xavier le Roy for instance? In *It´s in the Air*, bodies levitate literally, not only metaphorically, namely, between their tendency to be actualized as agents of kinaesthetic possibilities and their potential to become sensual concepts. Here, they are presented as virtual concepts. Neither are they treated as texts in a common sense and their activity is not exhibited as *writing,* nor is the audience brought into a position to *read* the bodies in a semiotic sense. In contrast, the bodies in *It´s in the Air* are primarily defined by their capacity to *affect* and to *be affected*. The trampolines as membranes and gravity as a force are the elements involved in the assemblage of this piece, and as such they help produce a very complex variation of hops, skips, and leaps.

The time line is choreographed into many different sequences. Sometimes the jumps are more about *velocity* or *degree,* sometimes they carry the bodies into different axes, and sometimes their main motif is a change of spatial perspective. And yet there is always a paradoxical bodily state at stake. This occurs when gravity comes into play *whilst* the energy produced by a previous bounce, which is still elevating the bodies, weakens. Thus, instead of their bodies metaphorically occupying space as signs, van Dinther and Ingvartsen literally rise into the air in a way that appears to be magical. Apart from those short blinks of an eye, when their bodies ascend into the air, *It´s in the Air* is more about virtual bodies and a state in which language, as a grid embedding them, is suspended. This becomes especially striking during a sequence right in the middle of the piece, when the two performers parody a stereotypical modernist movement phrase (collecting energy, contracting, jumping, rolling over the floor, coming up again,

2)
Deleuze writes about this kind of movement: "Absolute immanence is in itself: it is not in something, to something; it does not depend on an object or belong to a subject. (…) It is only when immanence is no longer immanence to anything other than itself that we can speak of a plane of immanence." (Deleuze 2001: 26f.)

releasing). We do not *identify* with the movement from point to point through space, but instead with the *potential* movement in-between these points, that is, with a movement that actually does not take place. If, as philosopher Alva Noë (2006) has suggested from a phenomenological perspective, perception is action, then what appears in the spectators' bodies at certain peak moments in *It´s in the Air*—when the bodies on stage are situated halfway between two forces, one pulling them down again and the other still pushing them higher—is not a perception that can mimetically identify with kinaesthetic qualities. Instead, it is an experience that the philosopher Alfred North Whitehead once called the *prehension* of always problematic sense-data.

The meaning that those watching *It´s in the Air* may gather from what they observe is not a semantics attached to a (cultural, ideological, or symbolic) grid in which the bodies are embedded. On the contrary, it is the encounter of different forces *beyond* language: that is, the manifold relations between the concrete and the abstract, possibilities and potentials, and the real and the virtual, to use the terms developed by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari. According to Sabisch, a concept of relation allows for thinking change and consequently involves a practice as long as the relation is not subsumed as relative to something else but conceptualized on its own, as a limit-point of thinking change at degree zero, that is to say, there where the status of relations remains ontologically obscure (Sabisch 2010: 71f.).



// Abbildung 02
Mette Ingvartsen, Jefte van Dintha: *It´s in the Air* 2008

In light of Sabisch´s observations, choreography can be conceptualized in another way than as an already constituted set of forms. How come then—soon after performance had begun to subvert norms and to parody identities—another turn took place and made a profound impact on choreography? This latter turn involved a shift of focus to recalling, once again, the old Spinozian notion of affect and to the question of what a body could do. What happened between Jérôme Bel´s *Jérôme Bel* (1995) or his *The Show must go on* (2004) and Van Dinther's and Ingvartsen's *It´s in the Air* (2008)? It might be claimed that poststructuralism´s pushing of modernism´s simplicity into adulthood ultimately

curbed the desire for *experimental* experiences as much as its previous chaining to and pinning down by expressive movement and already determined expressive qualities of the body. Why did the introduction of a semiotically secured body into choreography not spell the end of a continuous encounter between choreography and theory? How could experiences continue to be turned into experiments? How could experience be experimented with, without following already constituted criteria and without being sheltered by all-too certain schemes beforehand?

In her 2008 talk, Cvejić argues for rendering *abduction* productive as a creative and inventive methodology for choreography. In contrast to one´s submission to a general norm, abduction, she further asserts, triggered the generation of forever new rules and kept open the dividing line between choreography and its non-choreographic outside. Through abduction, the field of choreography could never be fixed or closed, but instead remained entangled in a continuous becoming of its components:

While induction is the mode dealing with actuality and the probable (from particular cases a general law is inferred) and deduction is the mode dealing with regulation and the necessary (a general law is applied to particular cases), abduction deals with potentiality and the contingent (Cvejić 2009: 337).

Hence, the relation between, in the widest sense, choreography as an assemblage of forms/formats and, very broadly understood as well, dance as an activity of bodies ought to be revisited. The proposition of dance as an activity, unlike those conceiving it as a derivation of previous choreographic norms, puts singular creations center stage. Such procedures do not contain their results but above all bring them forth in processes aimed at the very *formation* of form.

Right at the beginning of her book *Thinking with Whitehead: A Free and Wild Creation of Concepts* (2011), Isabelle Stengers raises a striking question: *what are you aware of in perception?* For Stengers, perceptions are contrasts to be synthesized, pure potentials not yet determined. Morever, they populate specific datums in which they are all assembled and upon which we act while they act upon us. Adopting her reading of Alfred North Whitehead´s process philosophy, I would like to concentrate on two key terms here: first, *prehension;* and second, Whitehead's notion of *problems* for which no solutions exist beforehand. Awareness, then, is what results from a new synthesis of sense-data and what remains thereafter, that is, when contrasts have found their satisfaction in

an always singular activity of prehension. In *Process and Reality,* which interestingly enough as much as unintentionally was published in 1929, two years after Martin Heidegger´s *Being and Time,* Whitehead defines prehensions as "[c]oncrete Facts of Relatedness." (Whitehead 1978: 22) No prehension takes place twice. It will change the prehender as much as the prehended.

Along these lines, let´s imagine a rock near the seaside: as actual entities both the rock and a thousand drops of water will be modified by each new encounter between them, with the result that for both prehending the self and the other will take place differently next time. Both are continuously transformed by their prehensions of each other. No wave hits the rock in exactly the same way as before. The rock in turn is altered with every breaking of the wave. Just as I am, writing this paper... While in the middle of a sentence, looking both back and forward for future words, I am changing as an actual entity while, hopefully at least, the reader also changes while reading. To cut a long story short: not only does an encounter between entities or an actual occasion not take place twice as an event, but also every single entity happens only once as an entity. The problem posed by Stengers could be translated into several additional questions: what other actual entities do we take into account when formulating a theory or a specific proposition? What kind of nexus or public matters of fact do our theories produce as propositions? To what extent do we creatively invent our own solutions, always singularily, without being able to rely on pre-constituted procedures, if we prehend a given environment as posing problems to be solved? What kind of new choreographic concepts need to be brought forth, perhaps even freely and wildly? Drawing parallels between Deleuze/Guattari and Whitehead, Stengers comments as follows on their *What is Philosophy?*:



// Abbildung 03
Mette Ingvartsen, Jefte van Dintha: *It´s in the Air* 2008

According to Deleuze and Guattari, an 'image of thought' is not described but is produced in the very movement in which thought exceeds the images that fixate it, to itself become production-sensation, an 'abstract machine' producing concepts that inhabit

what is, in itself, neither thought nor thinkable, the 'plane of immanence'. (Stengers 2011: 267f.)

If choreography is conceptualized less as a norm than in relation to such a plane of immanence, and if it is no longer conceived in terms of pre-defined rules or some kind of poetics, which would determine the activity of bodies in advance, then it is as yet undetermined. By further implication, it is a methodology to be invented, primarily involving creative moments. Therefore, we urgently need to specify what we understand by the prehension of problems and adopt an empiricist or even a pragmatist point of view. *What are you aware of in perception?* Stenger's notion of "form" is clearly distinct from those who claim that forms pre-exist bodily activities. Instead, she emphasizes the problematic tendencies of forms and claims that they arise from incalculable prehensions. In this context, she is thinking explicitly about the production of art and its potential to bring forth changes in, and of, the world. If we focus on the boundary between established and unformed territories, that is, the famous boundary between art and non-art, choreography and non-choreography, then we will leave behind any sense of certainty:

The insistence on the problem does not implicitly contain the means for its solution; the work's 'idea' is not an ideal from which the artist takes inspiration. It exists only through the risk it brings into existence, by the fact that at every step artists know they are exposed to the risk of betrayal, particularily when, through laziness, ease, impatience, or fear, they believe they can decide on the path, instead of capturing, step by step, the question posed to them at that step (Ibid.: 216).

Neither is everything necessarily the effect of an interplay of signifiers, nor is there always a vantage point outside of language, and only seldomly does it bring us further to focus our awareness only on how bodies signify. It is also important to find out how they can affect others and be affected by others. Thus, Whitehead himself assumes that "[e]ach actual entity is conceived as an act of experience arising out of data. It is a process of 'feeling' the many data, so as to absorb them into the unity of one individual 'satisfaction.'" (Whitehead 1978: 40)

The notion of satisfaction leads us back to experience as an experiment on the level of affective conditions and to Sabisch's investigation into the relations in choreography: is choreography a matter of relations? Can relations be choreographed without having any terms of reference beforehand? How might we think and act upon

choreographing relations? Are perhaps these relations those choreographing? Can relations choreograph other relations?

Until now, many scholars have claimed that there has to be some*thing* that choreographs something else, things choreographing and things being choreographed. Bodies versus forms. Forms versus bodies. Sabisch proves the opposite: in the first instance, we must deal with the virtual relations between things and bodies, with relations without terms of reference, and with organs without an already constituted organization of the body. *When choreographing, we have to start in the middle, that is, in-between*. Only there can we always do more than we could have imagined beforehand.

Against this background, choreography, as the choreographing *of* and *by* relations and as an activity of bodies prehending and transforming each other, cannot be considered to be a given form that is derived from a norm in that sense. It takes place beneath the already sedimented strata of experience and it experimentally problematizes and thereby relates bodies as much as institutional environments and other processual assemblages in different ways. Nothing is subjected to or put under forms. While Sabisch's *Choreographing Relations* rethinks David Hume's dictum about relations always being external to their terms of reference, Cvejić reminds us of another insight drawn from Whitehead's process philosophy:

Speculative metaphysics in pragmatism takes as much risk as the experience it tries to describe. Namely, it reverses the classical principle operari sequitur esse (functioning follows upon being) into esse sequitur operari. Functioning precedes being, so processes are basic and things are derivative, because it takes a mental operation to extract 'things' from the blooming buzzing confusion of the world's physical processes. For process philosophy, what a thing is consists in what it does. Movement, passage, and processual indeterminacy have an ontological priority over position, signification and social determination (Cvejić 2009: 335).

——— *What are you aware of in choreography?* Certainly not only of steps being performed and poses being adhered to by bodies. And certainly not of a general technique to be applied to particular cases. What would happen if we thought of choreography neither as a poetics nor as a pre-existent set of forms determining dance as an activity, but instead as something that we have to construct and actively produce through Whiteheadian prehending? If dance as an activity were more than just the realization of pre-existent

choreographic norms, we would become aware of everything as being potentially choreographic: intensive movements of bodies in what André Lepecki once called "small dances," (see Lepecki 2000) tiny shifts in things, and, as Sabisch emphasizes, qualitative transformations of bodily assemblages, and even modifications of the relations between institutional mechanisms. In all these cases, there is no norm under which our activities could be subsumed and which would reduce them to realizations of existing possibilities. As potential activities, emerging from the prehension of not yet determined problems, our dances would actively invent forever new contrasts and forever new attainments of these contrasts, without needing a manual explaining how to proceed and, as Stengers underlines, without needing a (metaphorical or literal) grammar to frame our singular utterances in advance:

The risk Whitehead faced can be stated on the basis of the contrast between language and grammar, in the sense that the latter demands conformity and claims to define the normal usages of a language. If one adheres to such a claim, each particular utterance becomes a simple case, and each locutor can be judged. Likewise, concrescence could be assimilated to a mode of realization of a preexistent possible and judged on the basis of the way this possible will be realized, the way the concrescence will produce, qua realized novelty, that whose pertinence has already been ideally defined (Stengers 2011: 360).

In opposition to such grammatical forms, choreographic forms as problematic forms of affective bodies and their reciprocal *prehensions* do not constitute our dances, but result from our activities. They trigger, in Whiteheadian terms, a creative process which is deeply aesthetic, since they provoke a becoming of choreography itself as, in the best case, a free and wild creation of concepts of what we can do.

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// Abbildungsnachweis

Figure I: Mette Ingvartsen / Jefta van Dinther: *It´s in the Air* (2008)
Figure II: Mette Ingvartsen / Jefta van Dinther: *It´s in the Air*(2008)
Figure III: Szenenphoto *It´s in the Air*, Copyright: Peter Lenaerts

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