

You Cannot make Mistakes, it's Art!

Von Reut Shemesh

Dear readers, dear students, and dear colleagues,

Before I begin translating my thoughts into written words, I would like to make a short remark: This is not an academic text; it is chaos, a long poem comprised of thoughts and experiences to be delivered and shared; it is a letter to the students I am working with; it is the wish to reflect upon the process of sharing knowledge and its relation to my own artistic practice; it is an attempt to describe and structure my teaching methodology for dance and choreography. Since I started working as an 'artist-teacher' in academic institutes, I have been asking myself: how can I share my own artistic practice to support students throughout their learning process? How is my artistic intuition entangled with the theoretical and practical concerns of students of education, media, culture and human sciences? This text responds to this open-ended question, with many different answers: How to share my artistic interest and methodology, and what is my role as an 'artist-teacher' within the academic structure?

Celebration of the Body

At the beginning of my seminars at Universität zu Köln, some of the participants share their insecurities about the act of 'dancing'. Often I hear the same hesitations: "I never danced before!" or "I am not a dancer... I don't know how to dance". Taking this and various skill levels into consideration, I ease into my improvisation methodology. We delve into the art of movement improvisation, executing spontaneous movements without prior preparation. Movement Improvisation deals with the interplay of performers/objects and their environment. It is the study of interdependent relationships within a choreographic setup, between bodies, space, time and things which exposes the 'invisible wires' holding them together, creating an ecology. By using the 'bird's-eye' perspective, we map the room in order to recognise the existence of 'invisible wires' and make conscious decisions about the tension a given space holds. Spatial awareness is a combination of actions which take place in the following order: Seeing → mapping → predicting/anticipating → navigating, which leads to movement in space → explorations = interactions with other people.

I also base tasks or exercises on concrete physical actions, such as walking, slow motion and synchronization. I am interested in the development of spatial relations, so I encourage students to create less and listen (through seeing and mapping) more, and to base their performance and actions on someone else's presence. By the end of the seminar, we are performing each and everyone's subjective *listening* process. In my choreographic practice, I use improvisation to discover what I would like performance to become. The spatial study is a fundamental part of my artistic process. It is the art of seeing and notating the invisible, listening to and capturing ephemeral motion, and hoping synthesizing it into one composition. This act of transforming what we see and hear into a formal gesture or choreography, is the greatest challenge of my artistic practice so far. This challenge is shared with students.

Learning threw the Feet

The wish to take part in an abstract, intangible, non-verbal and ambiguous physical experience related to one's subjective existence, is one of the core motivations behind the seminar. Our bodies are chock-full of incorporate information, such as human behaviour, gender performance, standards of beauty, social background, psychology, group dynamics, age and race. Choreography offers a heuristic learning process without necessarily demanding an immediate verbal theory or justification. Yet, choreography practice is an interplay between various theoretical studies students are engaged with. There is no dichotomy in this type of learning process; the mover is not asked to evaluate, verify, disprove or deliver any immediate comments or critique about his/her research findings. These studies are a side effect of placing ones' body in relation to another, giving the chance for many bodies to coexist in one room, moving relative to one another. This experience remains complex, yet reflected and registered. By reflected I mean, the actions one takes are based on kinesthetic awareness and proprioception, realized through movement improvisation tasks. After an improvisation session, we discuss the actions, and the composition which resulted from those actions. Students are

invited to speak and share their experiences. At first, most describe their feelings, such as affection and joy, while verbalizing and narrating their movement's steps. Afterwards, we analyze the ecology of relationships in the room. At first, we make an inventory of the components; such as actions, movements, music and objects. Afterwards, we ask about the combinations of different elements as a whole. That methodology is inspired by the artist and teacher Julia Scher, Professor for Multimedia Performance-/Surveillant Architectures at the Academy of Media Arts Cologne. However, this is not a therapeutic session. I am not a therapist, I am an artist. The choices people make are mostly conscious and related to the specific task. My role as an artist-teacher is to facilitate complex experiences related to the individual's body, which contains information and identity, reflected through actions.

Shameless Bodies

I tend to focus on gender roles in various ways. Social conditions strongly influence the body and in particular standards of beauty. This applies to the female body, as well as the demonstration and exertion of masculine physical power which is expected from, and this performed, by men. By different gender roles I also mean oppositions as antagonistic forces; I am fascinated by the use of oppositions within a choreographic setup. Such as motion versus freezing (stillness), fragility versus strength, human versus mechanical, the collision between present and past, and control versus release. I am intrigued by the perception of paradoxical relations. What kind of tension can opposing poles create within a composition? For me, and some other artists, the 'contemporary dance floor' is a place to question these standards. On the dance floor, beauty standards are measured differently, and physical exposure to one another can actually assuage one's own body image. An invitation to an alternative working environment is offered, a room to celebrate one's own body. This joy and affection is the toll which allows the participants to travel out of their conditioned bodies, peeling away uniformity and finding new possibilities to move. In my artistic practice, I frequently experience the joy of inhabiting my own body, something that developed slowly throughout the years. That joy creates a comfort in moving shamelessly in space. Comfort created by a 'kind gaze' is a basic component I created to play with any material, and to allow creativity, to welcome trust and intimacy. These working conditions increase the range of movements possibilities, allowing motion through all joints and limbs. Creating such an atmosphere stems from the belief that embodied information is valuable, and can contribute to mutual research. Mostly, I have great affection for students. That feeling grows unconditionally and empowers both me and them. We transmit a hidden message of acceptance without needing to verbalize or perform a certain knowledge. This physical and mental state is strongly related to the act of listening and observing mentioned before.

During the seminar, I ask students to look at each other with '*good eyes*'. As the gaze softens, an encouraging working environment is offered. This gaze symbolises acceptance and is telling; "*I see you and I wish to see more*". This allows participants to share and expose their story in the form of movement and choreography. But I am not becoming a friend. I give myself space to remain in a caring and giving position. I tend not to share my private life in my professional work. In my teaching and artistic practice, the creations I make are based on the joy and affection I get from bringing present in my own body.

Teaching methods of Choreography

I still ask myself: how to teach an art? How to give feedback? Is taste involved? How to introduce themes or topics? Or, should I rather focus on the technique of choreography making? I also ask myself if 'art making' per se is at all important for students in education, media or social studies. Or, can art become common channel through which we can share certain values and perceptions?

Over the years I have experimented with different teaching methods. I figured out: it's about the introduction of several approaches, styles and ways of working. I am interested in sharing knowledge and exposing students to different perspectives. I want to be part of a studying process which offers a variety of possibilities, from which people can choose from. In one of my latest seminars I came across the following question: "I don't know how I can choose... I could do everything... it is art". At that moment, the student was lost in the endless forms that art takes. The act of focusing and choosing is an inevitable component in an artist's work. From time to time, I stumble upon the same question. I discovered that decisions can be made either vertically (deep ↓) or horizontally (wide ↔). A vertical decision for me would be to develop further a discrete element, like a shake, slow-motion gesture, a jump, etc. A horizontal decision for me would be to add elements to an existing composition. Usually, I advise students as

I advise myself, to make a vertical decision. "Choose only one element, focus on it and develop it further." The pleasure of going deep into an element, thought, concept or a theme is satisfying and rewarding. For me, it is simulating the process of deepening into myself.

I believe that in an endless amount of possibilities, there is only one. "*The body speaks no matter how you suppress it*" (Goodeve 1997: 58) says Rainer. This sentence fascinates me because frequently I find ease in making dance pieces; concentrating on the body and the room, initiating and performing the listening process which I described at the beginning of this text. The body as an artistic material 'speaks' its way through choreography – nonverbally, intuitively, using embodied information.



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Abb. 2



Abb. 3



Abb. 4

Literatur

Thyrza Nichols Goodeve (1997): Rainer Talking Pictures. In: Art in America. 85. Jg., Heft 7, S. 58.

Abbildungen

Abb. 1-4: Photo series of Shemesh's seminar at Universität zu Köln, Institut für Kunst & Kunsttheorie (winter semester 2018/2019). Fotos: Lea Pasterkamp