

Beyond the Ordinary

On Artistic Research and Subversive Actions through Dance

Efva Lilja

I was invited as Keynote Speaker by *Gesellschaft für Tanzforschung* for the conference on *Practice as Research*. My keynote was presented as a performing lecture. I danced, talked, whispered, hummed, showed films, played music and exemplified my talk through scores and drawings. None of this is printable. So, I have done a special version for this publication, trying to get to the core of my talk/performance. Please join me for this journey: Beyond the Ordinary.

What is the significance of standing still? Death offers stillness, but once dead you can neither stand nor dance. The muscles that keep your skeleton upright demand an active heart. Standing still is therefore the simple way of saying that you are standing up without doing anything else.

Dance originates in stillness. That is a fact. Movement overtakes thought and initiative. In the search of meaning, it is the body that transports the movement toward a physical and intellectual context. Dance can drown the background noise of living and the maze of politics, making us aware of thoughts so frail that they splinter from a single breath. The body can articulate what the tongue cannot. Words often turn up the volume and get stuck, halfway. A movement is always heard. Sometimes I imagine that there are just a certain number of words, a certain number of movements. When we have used them up, we stand without a language. Dumbstruck. What happens then? No poetry, no songs, no conversation, no arguing, no laughter or cries for help will be heard. No stepping, no climbing, no jumping, no rolling or lovemaking. One can imagine that everything continues within the body as inner thoughts and movements. What if that's how it works?

Inside you there are thoughts, emotions and feelings in a haphazard mixture. They mess around among muscles and organs, get caught up in some

joint or other skeletal part, slip off and move on. The more you listen, and you must listen closely, the messier it gets. The sensuous experience of a body in movement, offers an expression of the whole complexity of living – through dance. With an inward focus, whatever sound or movement escapes the body, will be involuntary and uncontrolled. Like a growling and grinding murmur; like occasional screaming or shaking. This may come as a surprise to others ... but what does it matter, when it is your inside dancing?

Inner movement can also cause imagined action or events. These are often thought-provoking. Inner dancing knows no gravity, no conventions and no shame, not even for the most intimate. Anything can happen – and it does. Opening one's eyes and looking out may cause a sense of loss, at least of compromise. Obstacles arise. What is self-evident on the inside is difficult to translate to a constrained outward life, always strangling the simple and natural inner dance. It makes you tempted to keep your eyelids shut. That kind of blindness to the outside and to others is an unsustainable isolation. The surrounding world puts demands on you. Keep on dancing, here and now. Dance is the instantaneous art. It is often said that it exists only in the moment when we share, take part and witness it. But it also exists in the exclusive inner world of the onlooker, who can sense it, listen to it.

I choreograph the process of thinking, transposed to linguistic levels where dance/movement are one and text/imagery/chatting are another. Practical and theoretical knowledge gives rise to insights that take me forward from doing and thinking. The work becomes a place for experiments that stretch the limits of what is possible, for the process that will re-formulate the present with new signs, words and movements, and for that which cracks up the linear in favour of enhanced moments and states. It stretches and expands territories, translates the perceived reality and linguifies it in new ways. Add to these standpoints also the question of a distinction between dance and choreography.

Photo 1: Evfa Lilja photographed by Viktor Andersson.



POLITICAL TURBULENCE

In a period of political turbulence, sharing space becomes even more significant. If mind and body are occupied with notions of the existence, that are out of synchronization with what is seen as normal and acceptable, it is a good idea to try alternative expressions. A choreographed event is a challenge that offers imagery we can use as an interpretation of reality where political processes, everyday acts and the easily recognizable is tested, retried and given new expressions. Hence, I am in movement, in language, in a state of readiness for an action that is inevitably political.

With this definition, choreography represents a linguification through movement. The movement can be mental or physical. We can see what you think; we can see what you do. How we act, through movement, has a greater impact than what we say. Knowledge in and about choreography as action and thought will develop through experience, studies and research that offer the expert knowledge needed for specificity. Your choreographic practice develops in relation to other practices, in relation to traditions, conventions, and cultural attitudes to both art and politics. Choreographic techniques offer tools for the composition of actions, physical and mental movements. Sometimes this turns into dance.

More and more artists seek strategies to affect society through art, empower the individual to take a stand and act to make a difference. This demands

movement. To make it work, you need knowledge, not least about yourself and the confidence to enter into dialogue with others, with one another. An investment in democracy and solidarity through action. Weighty words, hard to use, but I insist. Through choreographic action, we are stimulated to think beyond what has already been said, beyond what we have already seen, beyond what we thought we know. Reality is re-formulated and reshaped into alternative imagery and events. All senses are activated to motivate living, even in the face of the incomprehensibilities that so-called reality presents us with. Language lives in the body, where movement is the foundation of thought. Choreography is the practice of thought converted to survival strategies through action. Love's conversation is dance.

THE ARTIST AS RESEARCHER

Seeing the world with the eye of an artist means watching, listening and using your knowledge and intuition to relate to the present without taking anything for granted. It also means questioning, rethinking and broadening your vision. It entails finding a new methodology for thought and meeting the politically complex challenges of modern society and modern cultural contexts – through art. Thoughts and actions are often limited by cultural, social, moral, economic or other restrictive conventions that shape our ideas about what is possible. Most of us think rather narrowly and accept the limitations we have experienced as given. To remove these limitations we must position ourselves actively.

Art as a space for liberated thoughts, something that activates as opposed to pacification through consumption, is on the move from the market to academia. Artistic research provides an environment for critical dialogue, development of methods, theories and practices that slowly change the concept of art and what art can do. The fields of research within the arts are wide and manifold – just as they are in science. Attempts to neatly categorise and streamline them, to create simplified models would be a disservice to art. Development and innovation are driven by the dynamics of dissent, by different practices, cultures and forms of expression – if we are able to articulate them. To my experience, theatre, dance and choreography have a weak representation in the academic context. At the same time many artists in these fields have very advanced research processes in relation to their professional practice. We develop methodologies, theories and forms of organisation and presentation on par with other fields of knowledge. As researchers we participate in the evolution of art and in doing so insist on a redefinition of markets and commercial values. This is where education, research and artistic practice interact. Methodologies are developed through practice and theories established by theorising this practice. Communicating ideas in writing is the channel through which we share our thinking with

others, various kind of text/documentation being more discursive than a work of art. Artistic research processes allow room for essayistic writing, performative and contextualised expressions and the extraction of terms and concepts from works of art. By communicating findings to others, we gain not only additional inputs for our own work, but can also have an impact on arts education, on other fields of research and ultimately on social attitudes to art.

A theory might be defined as a collection of related notions, which together form an image or an explanatory model for an artwork, or some other object of research. As researchers we explore art in a context and formulate this by positioning the work.

For a theory to be valid it must have an explanatory quality and contribute to the understanding of a subject among peers. It must be meaningful to those with competence in a specific field of knowledge (read *art*). Many artists present theoretical reasoning in their work and their research contributes to the evolution of artistic theories. There are plenty of good examples in research documentation and dissertations, but also in books and web publications by artists outside academia. These contributions can support methodological development and also further production and communication.

We may be unaware of the evolution of artistic theory or doubt its relevance. Artistic education most frequently references theories from the humanities. This is the case when we operate in an environment that does not respect art as a basis for research, or, in keeping with old competitive conventions, hesitate to give credit to fellow artists and researchers. We must overcome these conventions by getting into the habit of quoting and referencing each other. We need to identify the system we are a part of and redefine our role within the power hierarchy that runs it. Still – we need a great diversity of theories and methodologies, and for this many of us turn also to the humanities.

ON THE MOVE

We must constantly re-examine the structures that frame our work as artists and researchers. If they appear to be too limiting or wrong in other ways, our task is to make constructive proposals for alternative systems or regulations. Regulations should be designed to further transparency, to provide legal protection and ensure quality. Regulatory frameworks can be evolved and changed if need be, as long as we work with partners with whom we can reason. The collegial and democratic systems prevailing in universities and other research institutions should enable us to do this.

Artists' careers are dependent on political, social and cultural factors. The common understanding is that we have to become more flexible, partly because we have digital media at our disposal, partly because more of us reach

a global market. This flexibility leads to quickly shifting trends, tendencies and conditions for work and research. The demand is not simply for products/works of art, but also the ability to pursue a process, to integrate it in other contexts, or to take part in various kinds of innovative activities. It is clear that artists are increasingly looking for completely different modes of artistic presentation and giving rise to new communicative strategies rather than continuing to produce objects or performances for traditional venues, such as theatres, galleries and concert halls.

In my book *Art, Research, Empowerment*, I claimed that more and more performing artists in different countries show an interest in artistic research. Even the big market players move into this area. Museums, theatres and galleries host research projects outside of the academic context. *The Arts Catalyst* in London produces projects that »experimentally and critically engage with science« (www.artscatalyst.org/content/about-arts-catalyst). They place the emphasis on playfulness and the kind of risk-taking that triggers a dynamic discussion about our transforming world. A forum such as *Documenta* in Kassel exhibits scientific processes and findings as art. Art is presented within scientific fora like the *European Organisation for Nuclear Research*, CERN. The *Tensta Konsthall* in Stockholm co-operates with scientists and artistic researchers, and there are more artist-driven fora that present artistic research in the performing arts appear all over Europe: *PAF* (Performing Arts Forum) in Saint-Erme-Outre-et-Ramecourt, *weld* in Stockholm, *Les laboratoires* in Aubervillier, *ICK* (International Choreographic Arts Center) in Amsterdam, *BadCo* in Zagreb and the organisation *SAR* (Society For Artistic Research).

There are individual artists who exhibit this interest, like choreographers Emio Greco, Jan Fabre and William Forsythe, who have all started their own research labs. Wim Vandekeybus has research activities as well as DV8. They are all men. Many women do research, but they rarely build organisations or structures around their projects. One exception is choreographer Anne Teresa de Keersmaecker and P.A.R.T.S., who set a new research programme in motion this year. The artist Agnes Meyer Brandis is somehow doing the same thing with *Forschungsfloss für Unterirdische Riffologie*, *ffUR*. Look at Mette Ingvartsen, who is a prominent representative for the concept of text in choreography. Check her research practice! Another recent example from the *market place* is the Danish project *RISK* where 24 choreographers document and share their processes and methodologies in a blog, also published as a book in 2015. Look out for the younger generation of artists, look at the home pages of innovative artists you are interested in. Many of them have a tab that says *Research*. This is a new challenge to the market, to the higher artistic education and for artistic research.

WHAT WE DO IN ACTION

I don't believe in opportunism. I believe in the importance of knowledge, critical thinking and action. Progress is not driven by norms or averages. We must go beyond the ordinary. Research and innovative artistic activity challenge conventions and stretch the limitations that fence in our thinking and our practice. For choreography to be relevant, it must work as a translation of both movement and touch, of time and space as perceived realities.

What if I say that choreographic action and conduct represent a linguification through movement? The movement can be mental or physical. The physical representation of a visible body is the thought's abode. I believe that what we do in action, in movement, has greater impact than what we speak. Choreographic techniques give me tools for the composition of actions, of physical and mental movements. I do, I explore, I evaluate, I discard and occasionally I arrive at a good dialogue. In *doing* I take the body as a starting point, in *thinking* I deal with time. The attitude to time (forwards-backwards, upwards-downwards or circular), the attitude to the techniques of narration (impressions, imprints, conditions) and the attitude to language (text, imagery, sound) are absolutely crucial.

In everyday life we move between physical and digital rooms, often by un-reflected passages. I draw my passages in choreography, words and imagery. In the last few years they find their form in site-specific works, in books or in images generated by body, paper or Plexiglas, on to walls or ceilings. I explore my abilities in relation to the space/room and my choreographic intention. I explore and research within and through dance, in dialogue with a rapidly changing surrounding world that constantly demands artistic and political positioning.

Much of what goes on in that day-after-day racking of the brain is unspoken, something given. Personally, I have an urge to express what I'm doing, how and why. I do this by scrutinizing my conduct, by documenting the work, by drawing, writing, dancing and speaking. I train myself in the techniques of unmasking by treating also scrutiny as choreography. I choreograph the process of thinking, transposed into linguistic layers where dance/movement is one and text/imagery/narration is another. Practical and theoretical knowledge is formed, as well as insights into what moves me onwards based on doing and thinking. I speak of experience, from experience. I speak about the hierarchies that guide language, art, and everyday life, about different power structures and about where the right of interpretation lies.

A SURVIVAL STRATEGY

Living close to art can be a survival strategy at a period when the stupidity of commercialization is dressed up as a concept of wellbeing. I work with, for, within and through choreography in close cooperation with other fields of knowledge. The work expands and widens territories, translates the perceived reality and linguifies the present in new ways. Choreographic work is an attitude towards a definition of art that has taken hold in our Western world and keeps pressing on. I'm in movement, in language, in readiness for the action that will inevitably be political.

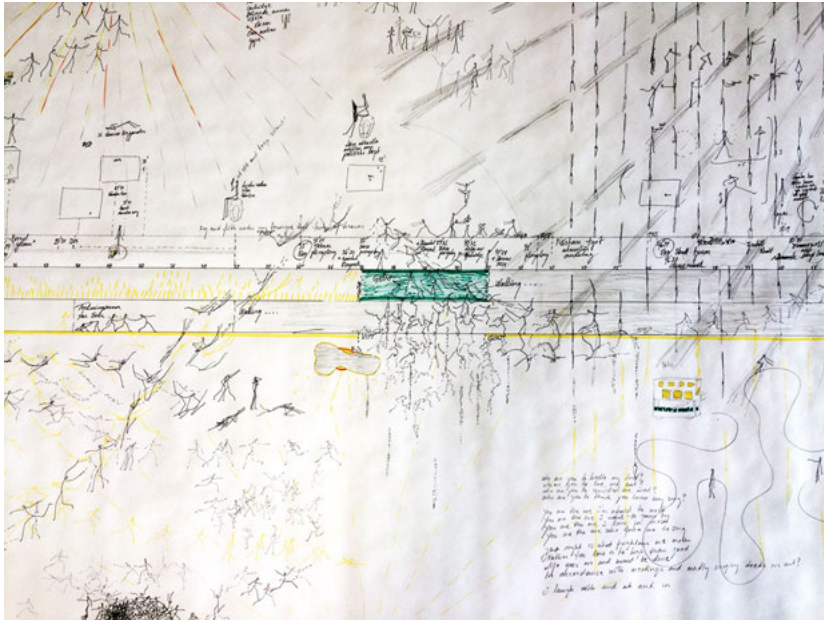
Every human is her loneliness. We live it and occasionally share pieces of it with others in return for theirs. Most of that exchange is physical. For a considerable time during my career I worked in silence, often criticized by dancers who considered my explanations poor and asked for more. For me it was a way of creating trust and demanding from each participant an active choice – a listening to the movement. This way of working demands continuity over time. Now, that I don't have a company to work with, new choreographic techniques evolve from the linguistic transposition. Rethinking the balance between words and physical expressions I now seek the unbalance, asymmetry and instability that activates all senses and demands from the onlooker a measure of creativity.

In daily positioning, such as the relation between the process and the product or the performer and the audience, or how representative we find the work – all that must be formulated over and over again. What validates the work? What forces it into dialogue? By choosing artistry and choreography as a method and practice of thinking, I can rethink, reformulate and offer new interpretations. I break the linear narration by insisting on a development of movement as unfolding. The performance, the exhibition, the book and the image all become expressions of a state of mind.

Putting yourself at the disposal of your memories, experience, knowledge, doubt and whatever else there is to draw from, gives you unreserved answers. The choreographic process puts at risk what I have previously learnt through doing, testing and retesting experiences in both practice and theory. I conquer, discard and offer a process of both exploring and conquering in the moment of departure. Trust and faith in the work is a prerequisite for taking a risk that can lead to failure or its opposite. You live and work in the balance between vulnerability and strength.

So, I crawl, walk, run and jump. I fall and rise up in a direction I choose. I prefer forwards. Sometimes I have to step back to get an overview of the choices I've made, to understand better what they have brought with them.

Photo 2: Drawing by Evfa Lilja, photographed by herself.



CONCLUSION

Our artistic work presents an attitude to living as a political force and as loving care for mankind. Art must be a meeting point where the rational collides with the irrational, a meeting point for that which widens the democratic room by giving the individual a voice. It is where you meet what you want to meet or what you neither want to see nor hear. You meet what is beautiful, ugly, disgusting, provoking or just palatable – and you enjoy it. The world and everyday life as we live it offers a messy, complex existence. We are confronted with understandable and incomprehensible cultures in competition for both space and attention. Art sharpens our senses. All these impressions find their form in thoughts and deeds. They demand that we take a stance. Most often we look at art as mirroring, as provocative or as a way to aestheticize society and politics, but we could also look at what the context and the terms for art production tell us about politics. We could look at what it means to be an artist instead of looking at what is produced. The shifts in the market and the political landscape in Europe, affect the conditions for artists to do work; to educate, to research, to produce. Don't trust anyone who treats you like you're ordinary.

The presence of art throughout the educational cycle and in research is crucial for progress in society. It provides the basic cultural understanding

needed to sustain human dignity, self-respect and curiosity. It can kindle hope and a belief in a possible future, beyond productivity, daily sustenance and an economic career. In basic education *art* is often used instrumentally as a means of learning, to improve dynamics within a group and as a means for the students to stay healthy. That means taking away from our children a chance to find their own cultural identification and to find a way to art – as art.

Since our philosophy of life shapes our outlook, the image generated by art is crucial to how we interpret the world. Art allows us to be provocative, to question, to reflect or to confirm and hence to test social ideologies. It can be difficult to take the risks that experimental or controversial practice entails. Yet, if we are to contribute to progress and innovation we must be able to develop and test ideas for which there is as yet no demand. Choreographic work is in itself a standpoint in our western culture and a way to carry it forward. We just have to acquire methods of constructive rebuttal in order to learn how to fly high without crashing into veiled impediments.

REFERENCES

- Lilja, Efva (2015): *Art, Research, Empowerment. On the Artist as Researcher*, Stockholm: Regeringskansliet, Retrieved from: <http://www.government.se> (last access: 26.5.2016).
- Lilja, Efva (2012): *Do You Get What I'm Not Saying? On Dance as a Subversive Declaration of Love*, Lund: Ellerströms.

FURTHER INTERNET REFERENCES

www.artscatalyst.org/content/about-arts-catalyst (last access: 26.5.2016).
www.efvalilja.se

PHOTO CREDIT

Viktor Andersson, Efva Lilja