Conclusion: Choreography as Creative Organization

The point of departure of this dissertation is the *Duo* project (1996–2019) of choreographer William Forsythe—a short dance performed by pairs that has taken various titles and forms over the last two decades. Looking back on the recent past, this manuscript also probes my special vantage point as a former dancer from The Forsythe Company, to critically reflect upon an experience of choreography that, to some extent, I share although I have not performed *Duo* publicly. My aim was to give the *Duo* dancers' voices and accounts of their practice a focal presence in this analysis, while also critically examining their practice within this finite microcosm of one project. A second aim was also to question and develop how my competences as a dance practitioner could be incorporated into the field of dance studies and writing theory. This meant not only adding systematic, discursive and critical methodology to my way of interpreting this case study, but also bringing forth an appropriate writing style. The resulting manuscript provides dance studies with a 'dancer's reflection' within this field.

The approach chosen for this research challenged disciplinary methods. The initial two axes upon which I framed my research interests were the fields of practice theory (Bourdieu/Wacquant/Schatzki/Reckwitz) and process philosophy (Whitehead/Manning). The pillar of practice studies, on one hand, opened the avenue of ethnographic empiricism—participant observation of activities in which meaning was understood to be situated in contexts of repeated, embodied doing (as opposed to in external structures or rules). I took from this field concepts such as *practice* and *habitus* to examine the generative nature of routine and patterns constituting dispositions. One the other hand, process philosophy more strongly eschewed subject-object divisions. Foregrounding passage and creativity, people and things were 'of time' and 'in transition.' From this theoretical approach I borrowed concepts such as *creation* and *relational movement* to examine a mode of dancing together in *Duo* in which a 'we' emerges and a work in progress continues. For the task of studying a duet—in which moving together was central—and examining this longitudinally, these perspectives helped to articulate an initial hypothesis. My preliminary thesis was that the *Duo* project would only weakly fit a traditional concept of an artistic 'work'—that is, a work produced by one author's labor, a work existing purely in performance, a work nostalgically recalling the 'original' presence of the premiere, a work that ideally reiterates without change in time

or context or a work constrained by the notion of choreography that operates through discipline and rules, as the force of what dancers 'must' do.[1] Rather, my view was that the *Duo* project was an emergent and relational nexus of practices anchored by passing down embodied knowledge and artifacts, in which there were multiple perspectives. *Duo* was not a very simple singular evolving entity, but rather a dynamically changing organization (multiplicity)—which I aimed to trace along its history, as a process of emergence and change.

To explore this hypothesis further, I drew a practical research question that shifted the aesthetic or theoretical problem of assessing the 'work' (a traditional concept that has long been critically overturned in dance studies) to focus on a praxeological one: what the dancers do in practice. I chose to foreground the terms *choreography* and *choreographic*. Slipping away from a defining question, such as 'What is the choreography of *Duo*?' I asked the processual one: *How is the choreography of Duo enacted and understood by the dancers in practice? And how does this change over time?* I also added onto this question the doubled perspective of a reflective turn, by asking: *How do I enact and understand Duo as a dancer-researcher?* I chose methodology to synergize with the available sources and traces that I could grasp of this enactment. This became a research architecture merging the approaches of reconstructive ethnography and detailed micro-analysis of a cross section of *Duo* key performances on video. A third layer was my continual self-reflection upon my memories and embodied knowledge as a former Forsythe dancer.

The results of this investigation developed along clustering themes, which grew into a three-part text, falling under the headings: Art World, Movement and Creation. Each part highlights a related aspect of the *Duo* project's *choreo-logic*—delineating the institutional framing and occupational culture of Ballett Frankfurt and The Forsythe Company, the lasting impact of movement and dancing together upon the dancers' intersubjectivity, the role of longstanding practices of rhythmical relation and the importance of creative experience within this community.

The main conclusions of the research are as follows: First, the dancers' enactment and testimony demonstrate that *Duo* is a processual and dynamically changing entity, richly multi-perspectival and plastic—a process of emergent, enduring organization. Secondly, in contrast to concepts of choreography foregrounding that which results from explicit planning of the dancers' movement by the choreographer and culminating in ephemeral performance, I develop the argument that the choreography *Duo* is a rich nexus of people, im/material practices, contexts and relations—an *emergent* organization, in which the artistic participants process, expose and expand its constraints.

Hence, instead of a choreographic piece as a static site of meaning, ideally reproduced by the performers for the audience (that is, the work of dance that reproduces the author's original and singular intent, or an enacted organization of dancing with strict

1 André Lepecki captures many of these aspects in one account of choreography (that he also problematizes): "Choreography demands a yielding to commanding voices of masters (living and dead), it demands submitting body and desire to disciplining regimes (anatomical, dietary, gender, racial), all for the perfect fulfillment of a transcendental and preordained set of steps, postures, and gestures that nevertheless must appear 'spontaneous'." Lepecki, *Exhausting Dance*, p. 9.

and static rules) the study presents the dancers' perspectives of choreography as an active *site* of thinking and doing and as a *process* continued before and after the event of performance. *Duo* enables practices of dancing together, blending singular and plural. The concrete example of *Duo* shows how a choreography is distributed between people and contexts, and thereby linked to the social plane. The attention to detail and expanse of evidence gives this assessment richness, ideally providing the reader with a palpable understanding of how this is the case. Since these chapters have been summarized individually in the text, here I aim to further sharpen overarching points.

First, it was impossible for me to describe the longitudinal changes in the *Duo* dancers' practices and understanding of choreography without recourse to the changing organizational frames and occupational cultures of Ballett Frankfurt and The Forsythe Company. This investigation revealed that, despite *Duo* being a microcosm for development of the pair's sociality, the teamwork of the ensembles defined routines of practices—as the team shared labor upon the choreographic pieces. Moreover, I found out how the reality of dancing *Duo* was constrained by the pragmatic requirements of the economic and municipal constraints of distributing public performances. This defined many aspects of working choreographically according to conventions and the theater's specific materiality.

Forsythe's choreographic works were not just made and then distributed but, as my writing shows, the distribution process impacted the development and changes of pieces and projects like *Duo*. For this reason, I drew upon Howard Becker's notion of an *art world*, which emphasizes the manner in which art works are brought into existence through interlacing chains of cooperation. Like Becker, I emphasize how my case study shows influencing conventions, pressuring markets, routinized contexts for working and retention of useful skills and materials over time. My position is not, as Becker's also was not, to discredit 'the' authoring artist and the special power they are given in 'their' network. Rather, like Becker, I conversely try to include all the activities, small decisions and participants that enable a work of art—such as *Duo*—to be performed at all. As Forsythe said himself in 2004, his name no longer belonged to himself alone: "William Forsythe has in the meantime moved away from me. […] William Forsythe is a collective of people."[2]

While the phrase 'the choreography of *Duo*' is often used by the dancers and Forsythe to mean the planned sequence of steps that they enact in performance, this does not mean, in practice, that the choreography is synonymous with danced movements, nor that it is epitomized in performance. Rather the choreography is also clearly contextual and materially built, involving many more moments and elements than the scaffold of performed steps. While my informants did not contest Forsythe's authorship of the choreography of *Duo*, they also understood choreography to be a matter of teamwork, in which Forsythe serves as a leader. While a choreography is titled, sold and performed as a unit of production, it is also a living, flexible and changing process. It endures and moves. As the longitudinal lifespan of the *Duo* project demonstrates, a choreography in-

2 Translation by the author. This citation is from Forsythe's speech on receiving the 21st German Dance Prize in 2004. Forsythe cited in Harteweg, *Kinästhetische Konfrontation*, p. 62.

terweaves a shifting interplay of people, practices of working, and contexts—as *creative organization*. Here I speak about *Duo*, but also generally about Forsythe's choreographies.

What is enacted and understood by the *Duo* dancers as 'choreography' is equally the steps, as a way of *being together* and *laboring*, on stage and in rehearsal. To work choreographically is a manner of communicating with one another, based upon histories of dancing together and the meaning accumulated in small gestures and signs. It is also a mode of exchanging and materializing movements. This intermodal practice is enacted through a rich sensorium of movement, communication and concepts—evident in the dancers' testimonies, where they fluidly interweave words, gestures and sounds. The choreographic process is not about achieving perfection; it includes study of the minor varieties of change and difference with which a created work may vary in practice. The process also involves continual reflection—both explicit and implicit—on whether the choreography is still 'right' for the people and the times. In this regard, I share some aspects of what Gerald Siegmund has characterized in Forsythe's choreographies, regarding the manner in which the performers develop "agreements" of how to act—also that a choreographic plan is never fulfilled in perfection, and in so doing, the dancers experience negotiation and take liberties.[3] I also share Siegmund's idea that the symbolic realm is important in forming this common sense and subjectivity. Yet I differ from his view that choreography operates as a "machinelike" order separate from practice, as "text" and "law" that produces sociality.[4] In my view, choreography is much more a site where practices and organization merge.

My observations concur with comparable longitudinal studies of the choreographies of Alvin Ailey and Pina Bausch. Dance scholar Tommy DeFrantz has provided an insightful volume on the biography and work of African American choreographer Alvin Ailey (1931–1989), foregrounding study of changes of the piece *Revelations*. Through his close readings of this work in performance, DeFrantz describes how Ailey "rejected traditional concert dance conventions of 'fixed' choreography for a more fluid, generational model that not only accommodated but *expected* changes in performance standards." He argues that this "paradigm shift" to the roles and representation of dancers allowed for an Africanist aesthetic and working process to thrive.[5] We have observed this also in *Duo*, in the way that dancers brought forth their talents and allowed for the generational rebirth of the piece. This suggests that an Africanist perspective on play and creation may also be fruitful for understanding groups—such as Forsythe's—where western models of the artwork and performer are under question.

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3 Siegmund, "Negotiating Choreography, Letter, and Law in William Forsythe," p. 213; see also p. 206.

4 Gerald Siegmund defines choreography in one essay as follows: "Choreography appears to be a machinelike structure of relational differences, an inhuman symbolic language that, together with the bodies' manifold possibilities of movement, produces a choreographic text." Siegmund, "Negotiating Choreography, Letter, and Law in William Forsythe," pp. 203–4. He also writes, "[…] choreography [functions] as a syntagmatic structure that the dancing body must follow. It must not be understood one-dimensionally as suppressing 'the body' or the freedom of movement, but as the very act of making subjectivity possible. […] This enables the subject to escape from its solipsism and to become a social subject by attaching itself to a network of signifiers that *relate*." Ibid., pp. 211–2 (italics in the original).

5 DeFrantz, *Dancing Revelations*, p. 81 (italics in the original).

A second study reinforcing the findings and methodology here is the research of Gabriele Klein on choreographer Pina Bausch. Through her concept of a "praxeology of translation," Klein's research of Pina Bausch's ensemble looks at the many interactive junctures in which passing on, adoption and transfer take place within this company's choreographic work. Emphasizing process, practice and betweenness with her concept of translation, Klein writes:

> A dance production is thus a *permanent*, *complex process* of translation: between speaking and moving, moving and writing, between different languages and cultures, between various media and materials, between knowledge and perception, between company members developing a piece or passing it on, between performance and audience, between piece and dance review, between artistic and academic practice.[6]

With greater regard of the gap between audience and performer than I have considered in this study, Klein has similarly uncovered the multiple time layers and intercultural rifts negotiated in any one performance. Through my production analysis of *Duo*, showing it to be relational and changing, I come to parallel conclusions.

Within my investigation of *Duo*'s movement, I have revealed the way in which bodies, subjectivity, rhythm and relation intertwine in choreographic process. From my position, the choreographic movement of *Duo* is not held together through a force of organization 'prior' and 'external' to bodies, as some prescribed and imposed organization of obligated movements and fidelity. Nor does movement exfoliate from each dancer, from the 'inside' out—as if each individual would move through their historically acquired *habitus*, while reacting to the other. Rather, I show how movement in *Duo* is produced through mutual attunement to *relational* potential, which makes that movement different from how it would be if one dancer performed it alone. The choreography is enacted through the support of an array of practices (such as studying videos, marking movements, entraining, making notes, and so on), which require conceptualizing and sociality to decide together the right modus of work. This shows that choreography emerges through bodies that are individual-collective—shaped on the level of the individual, the dyad and the ensemble.

While *Duo* dancers experience relation profoundly in dancing *Duo*, my fieldwork showed that they are also artists who have a strong sense of their own individual bodies. Their bodies and embodied knowledge set them apart from other, non-Forsythe dancers. They also set themselves apart from one another, in a mutually beneficial way: a 'Jill' is not a 'Regina.' A 'Brigel' is not a 'Riley.' Their bodies place them at risk: if they are injured, they experience pain, and they may not be able to perform. While they engage in relational movement in *Duo*, they still carry histories of being western selves (having emphasized their bounded bodies, their coherent biographies, their roles as competitive workers and consumers, and so on). They also, of course, carry on with their activities as persons and citizens outside of the workplace. This makes their subjecthood a complex mixing of modes of relational constitution and modes of western individualism.[7]

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6 See Klein, *Pina Bausch's Dance Theater,* p. 13, emphasis mine.

7 Chris Fowler writes, "Our contemporary conception of the individual as indivisible is an influential construct […]. However, there are still times when more relational personhood is brought to the

It for this reason that I see the choreography of *Duo* as a nexus of practices (including the dance movements that the dancers would call 'the' choreography), in which there is friction as well as enmeshment. The sustainment of *relational movement* in *Duo*, as I develop in section 7.2, provides the dancers with a new understanding of their selves, for it suggests that one is 'brought out' through other people: one's partner, the choreographer and the audience.[8] Each *Duo* dancer is grateful to the difference between subjects that supports their partnership.

The movements of *Duo* are not expressive in the sense of linked to communication of stories, narratives and feelings; rather, they are—as some dancers told me—expressive of forms and qualities. These movements are cultivated through pictures and geometries, as well as insider-jokes, names and references. It is well known to Forsythe and the dancers that the inner experience of a dancer is relevant to performance but not communicated to the audience (that is, there is a disjunction between the aesthetic experience of the dancers and that of the spectators). The dancers generally do not focus or understand their work as communicating to the audience, though they understand that the gestalt of a performance must communicate something beyond their, and even Forsythe's, control. Dancing *Duo*, and other works by Forsythe, is thus tacitly loaded with 'inner' experiences and feelings that are not discussed among the dancers, and perhaps not even articulable. The dancers take pleasure in their work, but also face an enormous athletic challenge when dancing *Duo*. In return, they receive affirmation from their partner, peers, the audience and Forsythe.

The high stakes of performing as a member of Forsythe's ensembles were a central topic of discussion in my fieldwork, in terms of the anxieties and stress involved in performing. Burnout and exhaustion were common. The stakes of *Duo* were expressed in nerves, sweat and fear, as well as the development of strategies to overcome such anxieties so that one could enjoy the work. Most *Duo* dancers appreciated what they became in their partnership and through longstanding *Duo* experience, which also enabled them to better bear individual consequences of success/failure. The upshot of this was that the psychological and personal aspects of choreography are significant. One limitation of this study was the difficulty as a native ethnographer to critically report upon this psychology, as well as to find language for talking about desires that generally were unspoken in the company culture.

Impact and Limits of the Study, Further Work

To close, I would like draw out of my conclusions a few simple remarks that clarify what the current manuscript has contributed the field of dance studies. The aim of this study has been to examine and model a case study of longitudinal choreographic practice, and

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fore when individuals recognize their debts to others and the effects that others' actions have on them, or the conflicting forces within them, or the way that an experience provides a new and unexpected understanding of things." Fowler, *The Archaeology of Personhood*, p. 17.

8 I believe this is true at large for dancers in Forsythe's ensembles, and that *relational movement* is practiced throughout the repertoire.

thereby to enrich the theoretical discourse with a practical example. My aspiration has not been to model or to define choreography generally on the basis of this case study, nor to situate the example in a comprehensive review of the current dance discourse on choreography. It has effectively developed methodology to include the dancers' voices and analysis of their practices in an investigation of a choreographic project, and to chart longitudinal change—both aspects of which are not new but still novel within dance studies.

Two difficulties within case study analysis are that they can be dismissed as singularities, or easily become obscure within their idiolect. Through my research I have strived to preserve a critical view and to intermingle 'native' and scholarly language. I have also aimed to clearly note what aspects may be extended more broadly to Forsythe's choreographic work at large, or to the field of western contemporary dance. For example, within the Forsythe scholarship, my work has questioned the term 'collaborative,' showing how dancers were respected partners rather in 'cooperation' and illustrating how the model of authorship corresponded with a style of leadership. It has also demonstrated how choreography impacts the daily lives and subjectivities of dancers.

It is my hope that the general matrix that I have used in this analysis would be applicable to other studies of dance in which matters of choreography and subjectivity are the focus. My way of understanding choreography has emphasized the following interrelated layers:

- Dancers' practices (training, rehearsing, learning, creating, performing)
- The organizational, material, economic and cultural context of institutions and the choreographic market
- Processes of embodied subjectivity, relations and personhood
- Components of choreographic structure in performance

I believe that this framework would be applicable to studies of most occupational dance forms in western contexts. This balanced approach shows the complicated and intertwining factors that produce choreographic works and labor. These entwined operations may be missed by scholarship that foregrounds performance analysis or relies on testimony from only one or two positions within the team.

The picture of choreography brought forth by this study is a processual and relational one: choreography as a sort of enduring and creative composition of organization. *Duo* does not eschew all the 'traditional' features of choreographic practice—including the primacy of dancing bodies—though it does present these bodies as articulate and relational, not inarticulate and solipsistic. In the current world however, the term choreography is changing to mean new things. Outside of dance, it is being used to name the complexity of interaction and organization in political campaigns, teamwork, even social networking as choreography. This "expansion" according to Rebecca Groves, involves "borrowing from dance new ways of conceiving their own disciplines in terms

of organizational complexity and the relational, affective, and perceptual dimensions of embodiment."[9] My view of choreography has also emphasized these aspects.

Forsythe—with his essay and also his term "choreographic objects,"—further adds to our discourse. He espouses, as I do, that choreography is not a static practice but a perpetually shifting one. He asks: "But is it possible for choreography to generate autonomous expressions of its principles, a choreographic object, without the body?"[10] By situating "choreographic objects" in the field of visual art, as works that render the movement and interaction of the spectator central (that is, a choreography without a trained dancer's body or the resources of dance practice), Forsythe engenders another sort of relational choreography in which sociality is emergent. This is based, as I have suggested within the body of this manuscript, on Forsythe's longstanding experience of crafting the conditions for creative interactions—in which dancers learn to value the relational potential of projects that perpetuate creative ways of repeating, assembling, investigating, reversing, attempting and moving.

The *Duo* project shows and reverberates with the tension between 'traditional' notions of choreography, tied to the practices of dance and the bodies of the dancer/choreographer, and the current 'expanded' approaches—in which relations, materials, affects, practices, concepts and complexity become composed. By proposing the notion of choreography as *creative organization* linked with experimental investigation of subjectivity, I wish to suggest that choreography is more than logistical procedures of dance planning, and thereby has great potential as a concept outside of dance studies. From my analysis, it is clear that even in *Duo*, a dance project, the choreography is not confined to the steps or the rules for action. Nor is choreography the power behind what the dancers must enact. Rather, the choreography is the entire organizational apparatus and network of people that enable and encounter the artwork. The choreographic is an unfolding nexus of practices, materials, concepts, beliefs and people.

One challenge with thinking like this is that the definition of choreography also begins to sound very general—as a big bundle of things happening together. With this case study, I have endeavored to demonstrate how a choreography (such as *Duo*) takes form because of the specific trajectory of collected elements and the particular history of practices merging. The *Duo* project was developed because of the distinctive movements (such as *showerhead*), the communication structures of each *Duo* pair, and the singularity of *Duo*'s structure (of entrainment, cues and alignment). Within this, dancing is essential: dance training, transnational dance histories and acquired dance *habitus*.

My approach has given testimony and terms to show the complex ways that bodies and subjectivities are produced in organized professional labor upon choreography—a choreography of choreographies. Two limits of this study are that I remain focused on production, without speculating on the reception of *Duo*, and also that I do not engage in comparative case studies of other choreographic works. The latter would surely have

9 Groves, "William Forsythe and the Practice of Choreography," p. 118. The term "expanded" has been brought into the contemporary dance scene by Mårten Spångberg, who borrowed it from art critic and theorist Rosalind Krauss's essay, "Sculpture in the Expanded Field" (1979). See Manson, "Interview: Mårten Spångberg."

10 Forsythe, "Choreographic Objects," p. 90.

helped to define categories and terms for the theory of choreographic process more generally. It is my hope that this study might inspire dance scholars to further incorporate ethnographic methodology into their research, to include the voices of the dancers in our studies of what dancing *is* and what choreography might *become*.