

# Do we know more than we can tell?

## Choreographers about their working-process

By Nina Aalders

### Introduction

“We will always be misunderstood”, laments a choreographer in the end of the first day of an intensive weekend at Danslab. The aim of the weekend is clear: Fifteen to twenty choreographers share experiences of their working-processes, and thereby develop certain ‘tools’. A tool can be anything that helps you to formulate and reflect on your own methods and to become inspired. The ‘toolbox’, to be filled with different ideas and concepts that describe divergent modes of practicing choreography, should inspire and enrich your own working-process.

Efva Lilja, a Swedish professor in Choreography, points also to another need for such a toolbox: “If we don’t form a community, someone else will do”. Being able to formulate what choreography ‘is’, gives you the power to create your own space and gives you a voice in the world. An important reason for accepting her professorship at the university in Sweden is also fed by this idea; the knowledge inherent to dance has to be legitimized.

Thirdly, formulating your work is good for subsidies. Funding-institutions like to know what it is they give their money to.

“We will always be misunderstood” was uttered ironically, more or less as a joke, obviously referring to the cliché of the ‘artist in his own world’. Though, it points out a problem that for me stood central in this weekend. This problem of translating movement into something less ephemeral, the problem of communicating ‘corporeal knowledge’, is what I will focus on in this report. To frame what this particular form knowledge can be, I would like to introduce the concept of *corporeal literacy*, a term invented by Rob Kranenburg, interactive media researcher, and Maaïke Bleeker, professor and chair of Theater Studies at the University of Utrecht. Subsequently I will return to the weekend, and summarize and quote interesting utterances I collected that somehow relate to this problem.

### Corporeal Literacy

Corporeal literacy questions our use of the concept of literacy. ‘Literacy often gets associated with words, with verbal language and books’, Bleeker writes, ‘but can also describe other reading skills, as, for example, visual literacy.’ (Bleeker 2008: 66) Literacy goes beyond the division of a mind that can read and write, opposed to a body in which that mind houses. Corporeal literacy blurs this mind-body-opposition, and opens up to other objects that can be read, other things involved in reading, other ideas of what the subject of this reading is and what it means to be literate:

‘corporeal literacy does not simply mean the transposition of a language related concept to the realm of the body, but rather a rethinking of the notion of literacy from a position beyond oppositions like language and the body.’ (66)

Corporeal literate people like choreographers and dancers have developed these skills in *reading and writing beyond the opposition of language and body*. Translating this corporeal knowledge is always problematic, because as someone pointed out during the weekend: ‘To translate is to lose something from its original meaning.’ Besides, it is sometimes not possible to translate, because the process is not always concrete and rational, but very often abstract and unconscious. How to translate intuition? How to translate ‘the instinct of the process’?

Lilja described this problem in oppositions of language and art:

‘Whatever action we take [in daily life], it is regulated by moral, ethical, juridical structures; our body is led discursively, like language. Language is being linked with the rational, with grammar, with structure. Dance and art allow me to be *irrational*. Dance or art forces you to go to or over the borders of our subjective limits.’

To talk about choreography, about this irrationality, she states that ‘We have to invent terms; we have to use *borrowed* language to describe ‘the linguisticity of the movement’

### Linguicity of movement

- ‘We can talk about a body in terms of presence, but the communication lies in the movement.’
- ‘What is movement: Is it energy? Is it relating to the world? Is dance always communication?’

- ‘When I move, I change my thoughts and my perspectives’
- ‘What do you expect from communication? Dance works through the body and the nerves. The *distributor of the communication* is the art of movement.’

When documenting or describing dance, should we talk about dance in terms of communication, should we describe the movement of the body? Or, should we document our research and the way in which our dance has been constituted? We talked about different documenting media: Internet, pictures, article, diary, and presentation.

This immediately leads to the question: ‘What is it exactly that we do in dance, that we should ‘crystallize’?’ Henk Borgdorff, lector of the Lectoraat ‘Kunsttheorie en Onderzoek at the Amsterdamse Hogeschool voor de Kunsten, also deals with this problem: What is the knowledge inherent to art and should a PhD in the Arts look like?

### Artistic research

According to Borgdorff, the *art practice* stands central in every part of the research-, or working-process. In the question, context, method, and outcome of your research, the artistic practice forms the most important part.

What distinguishes the artistic research from academic research is exactly the knowledge and understanding that comes from that practice. Instead of insight and comprehension, artistic knowledge offers you *experience*. The knowledge that is gained is not in the first place theoretical but *practical* and rather *embodied* than propositional, rather *knowing how* than knowing that, rather *pre-reflexive* than explicit, rather *tacit* than focal.

Borgdorff states that ‘artistic knowledge is first of all an articulation on the non-conceptual forms of experience and knowledge in and through the creation of art.’ Here again, the translation of the knowledge inherent to dance is problematized. This importance of the non-conceptual experience and knowledge results in a PhD for the Arts, in which the *practice* forms an important part of the outcome, next to a documentation and reflection.

### Translating/communicating

Translation and communication of knowledge takes place on different levels in the working-process. Firstly, the translation of inspiring ‘research’- material (visual, corporeal, verbal) into an idea for a choreography, also called ‘the open part of the research’, has been described as a process of ‘digesting the information with your body’. This materialization of a theory can be disappointing. On the other hand, after having worked with a certain idea or theory, you are sometimes able to shed new light on that theory; you add something to that idea.

Also, we talked about the translation from research-process towards a presentation. The research has to be put in a form. The difference between a presentation of your research and a performance of your research was during this weekend defined by the difference in relation to audience. Giulia Mureddu suggested that in a presentation you want to inform the audience and in a performance you want to give your audience an experience.

Thirdly, The translation of a (corporeal) idea should also be made towards the dancers or other collaborators. This collaboration can be refreshing, inspiring, moving you into another direction. The nature of the collaboration depends on the amount of freedom given to others, or the phase of the research. Karine Guizzo: There is also a period in which that research needs to be protected, to be completely free.

The lamentation I started this report with was one of the responses in the discussion around the television-programme *So, you think you can dance!* In this programme, all dance-disciplines were appreciated and discussed by the jury, but as soon as modern dance appeared on stage, the reaction was: ‘I can’t judge this, I don’t understand modern dance at all!’ To emancipate modern dance from this imago, ‘and this does not mean making modern dance more easy’, as Efva Lilja emphasizes, is very difficult: Translation means loss. This pilot-weekend has been successful in laying bare this difficulty as well as the importance of communication. I think further meetings can be very productive for the development of certain ‘tools’ or language to translate corporeal reading and writing.