

Processing Dance

Thinking outside the *Frame* – Research on choreographic research

By Jochem Naafs

Who defines the product?

What defines the product?

What is the knowledge of dance?

Why would these questions come up if you put about 25 choreographers and dance scholars in one room? I am not sure. Maybe it is because dance is not in any way really tangible. Dance is temporarily. This article reports my thinking and feeling during and after *Frame – Research on Choreographic Research*. My thoughts have been leading me towards the question what a choreographic product and choreographic knowledge is and can be.

Patching the frame

On December 6 and 7 Danslab organised *Frame*, a two day gathering of choreographers on artistic research, or if you wish: artistic explorative processes. To discuss this topic Danslab proposed to take two (related) types of knowledge as a starting point: embodied knowledge and subjective knowledge.

After a quick introduction of all the participants, Anne Nigten, initiator and director of The Patchingzone (and at the time still manager of V2_Lab) presented her processpatching method. This is an aRt&D¹ method designed for connecting theory and practice in interdisciplinary projects in the electronic arts. Nigten argues that there are four main qualities of aRt&D: using various working methods, asking intrinsic research questions, combine first and third person perspectives and the collaboration with the audience/participants.

Nigten argues that processpatching can be described as a method for “basic research and experiments in social science”, and that it functions for “multi and interdisciplinary collaboration [with] art as method” (Nigten 2006, 290). Processpatching is a “blend of techniques and methods, [where] anything goes” (Nigten 2006, 290). “A *Processpatcher* is someone who pieces expertise, approaches, techniques, and materials together in an associative way” (Ibidem, 91).

¹ aRt&D could be described as research and development in practice-based and practice-led research. Brouwer, Joke, Arjen Mulder and Anne Nigten (Ed.). *aRt&D. Research and Development in Art*. Rotterdam, Nai Publishing 2005.

Unfortunately it was not clear to the participants of Frame what you could actually do with the processpatching method. This became apparent after we broke up into smaller groups. 'What kind of research has Nigten done using this method?' and 'How was this method helping this research?' were questions the participants of one of the groups were asking.

What characterises choreographic research?

The participants during Frame used Nigten's processpatching approach, in a way. In an associative manner they were struggling with methods, questions and possible answers. The question arises if this was because of her presentation, or because artists use comparable methods anyway. Does the research you do through dance differ from the aRt&D in the electronic arts and is artistic research different than academic research. What distinguishes choreographic research? Three main questions were formed to use as starting point for new discussions: 1) what is the knowledge of dance? 2) What is the discourse inherent to dance? And 3) who and what defines the product?

I would first like to elaborate on the third question. Giulia Mureddu referred to Nigten's remark on the role of the audience/participants in electronic art when she pointed out the different role the audience plays when she is doing research rather than working on a production. When working on a production Mureddu is always aware of the fact that the performance has to be shown. When working for Danslab this pressure is not there. Her research work tends to be even less concrete than her performances are. On the other hand she has the freedom to work more analytical. Apparently the sharing of research results is not what she is focusing on in her choreographic research, while when working on a performance that is one of her focal points.

Interesting is the transformation that Bruno Listopad experienced. When he started at Danslab, research meant 'not working towards a product' for Listopad. Now he realizes that a research needs an outcome as well. There is a need for sharing, for communicating what you have researched, he argues. This moment of communication can be a performance. This argument seems to bring performance back to the core issue: communication between performer and spectator through art. Listopad stresses that a product can be unfinished. A choreographic product is processful and flexible. But what does that mean for the spectator? Listopad's claim makes that the maker defines the product. The spectator has only to follow.

Dylan Newcomb argues that the economic market system is also valid for dance. He uses an updated version of Karl Marx's cycle to explain this. Maybe unintentional, but definitely interesting he exchanges *production* for *creation*, which makes the cycle more clearly aimed at art products. Newcomb stresses that the product is defined by all the actors of the cycle. The product will change if any of the qualities of the cycle will change. The artist can try to exchange creations and influence consumption. Newcomb argues that artists should be pro-active and create their own circle. The artist should be the first to break habits and have the courage to develop new market strategies.

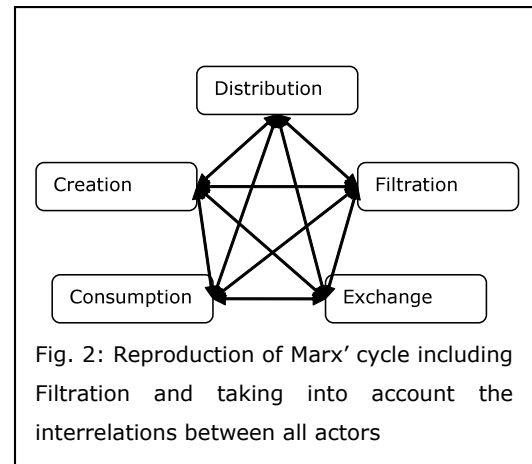


Fig. 2: Reproduction of Marx' cycle including Filtration and taking into account the interrelations between all actors

Related to Danslab you could state that by offering spectators the opportunity to come and see an unfinished performance (as a 'product', or rather as a 'process') there will probably emerge a demand for such performances. Other live artists like Rogie C.S. and theatre collective Powerboat seem to have an urge to show performance as a process instead of a product as well.²

This approach emphasizes the temporal and intangible aspects of live art. The product that is live art is an ever-changing process. This approach also underlines the point of sharing, of communication. Art and especially live art exists thanks to the presence of both the work of art and the beholder. If the audience is able to interact with the piece of art, the communication is actually going back and forth. The piece of art can change because of the presence of the beholder. We can now try to formulate a possible answer to the first question as suggested during *Frame*. To do this I will split the question in two.

1) Who defines the product? From the discussions during *Frame* can be concluded that there are many ways in which a product can be defined. The product is what the makers wants it to be, or what the beholder sees in it. The product is defined by the way it related to both creator and spectator. An artistic product is

² Rogie C.S. has been working on the performance *Brotherhood/ Sisterhood: What are we going to do about it?* through workshops and public performances. Work in process was shown a.o. in Theater Kikker in September 2007 and November 2008 and in the Rotterdamse Schouwburg in November 2008. <http://www.rogie.nl>. Powerboat presented their performances *Datsja* (2007) and *Poldertango* (2008) as work in process on several festivals. Work in process was shown a.o. on Festival Cement in March 2007 and 2008, Festival over 't IJ in July 2007 and 2008 and Festival Boulevard in August 2007. <http://www.powerboat-rotterdam.nl>.

something else to everyone; the definition of the product is therefore in between the artwork itself and the person perceiving it. An artwork as product is not a singular object. It is an ever-changing process. Both the artist and the beholder redefine the product every time again. Most choreographers participating in *Frame* argue that the artist should define what the product is, or at least that they should be pro-active in the definition of the product.

2) What defines the product? A choreographic product proves to be a twofold, on the one hand it is the performance as temporarily and volatile as that may be. The product is a mutual agreement between dancer and spectator in the here and now. On the other hand a choreographic product is a process without a demonstrable beginning and end. It does not start at the first rehearsal nor does it end after the last show. The product is defined by the context in which it is perceived. If the product is an outcome of an artistic research it is defined by the other outcomes like pictures, video and written reflection of the making process and of the product itself. It also depends on where the product is shown. A work of art in an art space like a museum or a theatre has a different meaning than the same artwork shown in a studio or during a research conference.

Material Thinking

Frame continued on the second day with a presentation of Henk Borgdorff. Borgdorff is one of the Netherlands most present advocates of artistic research. He offered an overview of what he names the important qualities and ingredients of artistic research. I will focus on his idea of 'material thinking' within the sphere of artistic research.

Borgdorff argues that artistic research is a free space within higher education. A free space for what he calls material thinking. Material thinking has two qualities. The first is that the practice of the arts is central to the research process; the second is that works and practices of art are partly outcomes of the research. Because 'we know more than we can tell', or in other words, 'we know more than we can write down', there is a niche that artistic research can fill. Artistic research is not about theory, but about thoughts Borgdorff argues. Where theory is written down in words, material thoughts are mostly embodied in artworks not in writing on or about art.

Material Thinking

"Material thinking is an articulation of pre-reflexive knowledge and experience embodied in artworks and creative processes" (Borgdorff 2008)

The idea of material thinking fits the two types of knowledge mentioned before: Embodied and subjective knowledge. To gain and share embodied and subjective knowledge, other practices than writing are necessary and other methods than the known academic ones are to be used. Actually there is no distinct, exclusive methodology for artistic research. It distinguishes itself from other types of research because of methodological pluralism. But one thing is clear, (part of) the outcome of the research should always be a work of art.

What can material thinking tell us about the definition of the product? The concept of material thinking in relation to artistic research is also about the outcome of artistic research. The third speaker at *Frame* provides with an example of artistic research.

Embodied and subjective knowledge

This speaker was choreographer and professor of choreography Efva Lilja. For Lilja there are several questions that are important in her artistic research. What is it what I do when I do it? Who is the artist? And how can I express myself through movement? Lilja notices two things in relation to the last two questions. The first is that the artist will always be judged. The second is that we all interpret each other. Both of these remarks concern the beholder of the artwork. The factor of communication is again an important issue.

Movement as the memory of the body is a research that arose out of the idea of making up stories on people you do not really know at dinner parties. Lilja wanted to become more aware of bodily knowledge and the way you can make use of this knowledge. To do this she did not want to literally represent memories. Lilja stresses that one of the distinctive aspects of artistic research is that an artist can also work in a subjective

Movement as the memory of the body

"The work [*Movement as the memory of the body*] sheds light on dance, movement, artistry and choreographic stage-work from the perspective of the specific character of dance as a form of artistic expression and focuses on issues to do with experience, memory and embodiment.

This process of illumination is grounded in the form of practical knowledge which is the typical form of knowledge particular to the creative arts, i.e. bodily experience.

The project applies and investigates this through a staged choreography of the elderly person's subjective experiences. The work with movement studies of older people provides the research material which forms the foundation of the choreographic process for a presentation of movement as the memory of the body: a form of fundamental linguistic research" (Lilja 2006: 5).

way. As an artist you can be both objective and subjective, she argues. This subjective point of view is reflected in the publication following her research.

With this research Lilja exposes subjective and embodied knowledge to her reader. By combining text with picture, video and personal written reports of the participants she manages to share knowledge that would not be possible to share through an academic paper. Lilja and Borgdorff both hammer at the significance of sharing knowledge and communicating the outcome of research. I have to agree. There is knowledge inside the artist that we cannot get to through the analytic and critical approach of humanities. This knowledge should be shared. This brings us to the third question of this article.

3) What is the knowledge of dance? As an artist/artistic researcher your artistic product is a means through which you share your process and your product itself. Your product is the materialisation of your (gained) knowledge. In artistic research the artwork can be accompanied by reflective material. This material can take several forms. Dance is body, dance is embodied, and dance knows the body. This knowledge cannot always be put into words. The understanding of the dancer/choreographer that not all knowledge can be made verbal comes from the fact that dance deals mainly with movement of the body in stead of the uttering of words. Dance is the art form most concerned with embodiment and with communication through gesture and movement. The knowledge of dance is also partly subjective and experience-based. The honest combination of subjective and objectified knowledge can contribute positively to academic research which is mostly concerned with objective knowledge, forgetting the idea that a pool of (inter)subjective knowledge is just as true and possibly even more true than objective knowledge is.

Framed

This article started as a report of *Frame – Research on choreographic research*. The great variety of subjects that turned up during this two day gathering of choreographers made that I had to choose a focus. I chose my own frame that may not always reflect the ideas of the participants. The answers I give in this article are not at all fixed and will hopefully stimulate you to react. A next *Frame* will be necessary to elaborate on the subjects discussed during *Frame* and in this article. Not only dance is an ever-changing process, so is research on choreographic research.

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www.playfulperformance.nl

Literature

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http://www.processpatching.net/downloads/processpatching_download.pdf

Links

Danslab www.danslab.nl

Processpatching/ Anne Nigten www.processpatching.net

The Patchingzone www.patchingzone.net

Efva Lilja www.efvalilja.se

Research group Art Theory and Research of the AHK (Professor: Henk Borgdorff)
<http://www.ahk.nl/ahk/lectoraten/theorie/index.shtml> (Dutch)

<http://www.english.ahk.nl/en/research-groups/art-theory-and-research/> (English)