

Re-living Bodies

The problems of archiving Dance and possible future solutions

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Dance¹ is a volatile art form: as quickly as it appears on stage, as quickly it disappears without physical traces, and the only thing remaining is the memory in the minds and bodies of the spectators. This is the beauty and the problem of Dance, at the same time: it only lives in the time-space frame of dancers performing in front of an audience. On a theatre stage, movement becomes “a medium for the transference of an aesthetic and emotional concept from the consciousness of one individual to another”² and passes through some meta-kinesthetic³ information, such as emotions, feelings, sensations that can only be felt within a live performance. Is there a way that these elements can survive into a recording of a live performance?

The ephemeral nature of Dance itself makes it very difficult to not only record or notate choreographic scores, but also to reproduce choreographies faithfully. This issue has always been present in the history of modern western dance tradition⁴, since the beginning of Ballet, “for ballets which have in them choreography worthy of the name suffer very badly in transmission”⁵. In passing a dance from choreographer to dancer there are adaptations and modifications, or even when a ballet role is passed over from a dancer to another; moreover, the changes are cumulative, “so that after a few years the choreographer (if still alive) can hardly recognize his handiwork”⁶. On top of that, unless a choreography is extremely bi-dimensional and almost robotic, writing down a choreographic score for archiving purposes is extremely hard. Different systems of writing notations have sprouted throughout history, even before the appearance of Ballet. Some post-modern and contemporary choreographers, who are not interested in perfect precision, have released their own personal notes, drawings or interpretive texts for dancers to be able to interpret and re-enact them as they please. As a

1 In this essay, Dance is capitalized when talking about the art form of Dance. This is a conscious choice of mine to elevate the importance of Dance and its artistic value. However, choreography, as the organization of Dance, will not be capitalized.

2 Martin, John. *Introduction to the Dance*. New York: Dance Horizons, 1975.

3 “supposed psychic accompaniment” (Martin, J) to physical movements. From the Meriam-Webster dictionary: “dance movement with psychical overtones”.

4 western is non capitalized on purpose, as a personal choice under the understanding that western and non-western are of the same importance.

5 Hall, Fernau. “Benesh Notation and Choreology”. *Dance Scope* 3, no. 1, Fall 1966: 30-37.

6 Ibid.

contemporary dancer and lover of post-modernism (as a philosophical concept), I wish that cultural institutions would facilitate this: collecting as much media directly from the artists' hands can give a great understanding of their body or work, but also could be the source of re-interpretations of their works in so many renditions that we could fill up theatres for the next century. Another step forward has been done by dance companies that have shifted from "notation" to "annotation" that "operates without symbols and uses language as a complement to images"⁷.

It has been clear that writing scores is not enough to understand choreographers' works, so in the past four decades video-recordings have become the main tool for preserving choreography. This is a good method, especially if accompanied by annotations and drawings as in the beautiful example of Anne Teresa de Keersmaecker's revival and recording of her first four pieces ~~ever-created~~⁸. However, it still lacks in transmitting the real essence of Dance. I'm not only talking about the sweat of the dancer, the warmth of the lights of the theatre or the feeling of excitement shared by audience and performers alike in a live setting, but I'm also talking about all that mass of meta-kinesthetic material, which we previously mentioned. Audio-visual materials transfer a tridimensional performance to a flat screen. Both in written scores and in video recordings, the sensorial is lost.

Therefore the real question is: How can we experience senses and touch of a choreographic work even though we are not in a live-setting? Some experiments have recently been done to find solutions. The contemporary dance company ICK Amsterdam have been following a journey to find ways to use technologies in order to collect dance data, still with a freedom of experimentation, with their travelling Choreographic Coding Labs in collaboration with German institution Motion Bank. This is an interesting step into what the future of archiving dance could be: the collaboration with computers, A.I., virtual reality and technology at large. To some, it is unbelievable or unacceptable to talk about computers or even robots in connection to a human bodily form of art such as Dance is. However, this is nothing new. Robots and dance have already had a long history together. If robots are simply automata, to borrow a term from Ancient Greece, puppet theatre is an example of collaboration between human and robotic bodies. More recently, Adrienne Wortzel and Carl Weiman have experimented with the idea of "a telerobotic site that functions as an online theatrical space for robots and actors, a remote space that can be

7 From *The memory of the dance*, interview with dance researcher Suzan Tunca on the website of ICK Amsterdam, February 26, 2019 (<https://blog.ickamsterdam.com/research/the-memory-of-the-dance>).

8 See: De Keersmaecker Anne Teresa and Cvejić Bojana. *A Choreographer's Score: Fase, Rosas danst Rosas, Elena's Aria, Bartók*. Brussels: Rosas, Mercatorfonds, 2012.

manipulated from remote locations via the web”⁹. This seems to be a type of theatre we were obliged to take part of during the last Covid-19 pandemic, but possible virtual spaces could actually be pro-positive solutions to improve archiving Dance in the future. Imagine entering a library, putting on your virtual-reality-set in a safe room and being able to enter the work of a contemporary choreographer, for instance William Forsythe, and interact with digital dancers around you, learning the dance steps and embodying the choreography. Sensing the dance on your own body and filling the historical gap through touch and your own experience. A.I. would help amateurs and non-dancers to correct their movements and understand the dance better. In a possible future, even humanoid robots would be able to reproduce and show choreography.¹⁰ We should start working now on the creation of these possibilities by incrementing experimentations of dance technologies, gathering data, creating digital archives, connecting libraries all around the world through the web. It is all possible, if we understand the necessity of archiving Dance from all around the world. We need to believe in the historical and cultural importance of Dance. To quote Bojana Cvejić: “in order for dance to be ‘taken seriously’, it needs to take itself seriously”¹¹.

9 Notte R., *You. Robot*. 109

10 The question and fear of extinction of dance made by humans due to the growing consciousness and awareness of non-human moving bodies need to be the subject for another essay.

11 De Keersmaeker A.T. and Cvejić B. *A Choreographer’s Score*: 8.