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Moving Towards a Group Dance

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Abstract: This paper describes the process of the creation of an improvised group dance, discussing how both the dance and the group came into being through practising with what were called ‘scores’. The dance was created as part of a three-year Ph.D practice-led research project. The question asked in conducting the research is: What is the work of ‘scores’ in the creation of an improvised group dance? where scores were verbal propositions, usually relating to physical, bodily or movement notions such as tangling and untangling or awareness of being subject to gravity. The aspect of the overall project discussed in this paper concerns the coming into being of the group in both social and material terms.

Keywords: Dance, Improvisation, Authorship

Introduction

In this paper, I will describe the process of the creation of an improvised group dance, discussing how both the dance and the group came into being through practising with what were called ‘scores’. The dance was created as part of a three-year Ph.D practice-led research project. The question that I asked in conducting my research is: What is the work of ‘scores’ in the creation of an improvised group dance? where scores were verbal propositions, usually relating to physical, bodily or movement notions such as tangling and untangling or awareness of being subject to gravity. The research took the form of a studio exploration with six dancers, including myself. We practised with the scores twice a week for three years. The aspect of the overall project I will discuss in this paper concerns the coming into being of the group. The starting point for my research was the dancing practice.

Theoretical Background

Group Dance

My role in the project was as its initiator, facilitator and leader rather than as a ‘choreographer’, where a choreographer would be the author of a work or the definer of its corporeal ‘values’. In Poetics of Contemporary Dance, Laurence Louppe writes that the work of the choreographer is to ‘…invent a body (or at least to elicit from already worked and conscious bodies a corporeity that is consonant with her/his project)’ (2010, 178). By bracketing the role of choreographer, either as a maker of movement and the creator of bodies, or as the director of the assemblage of movement generated by dancers, I aimed to put aside roles and processes often assumed both by participants in dance making and the witnesses of dance creation in the ‘market’. Rather, I hoped to uncover other processes at work in creating both the dance and the group.

I did approach the project with a broad intention to make a work with a number of other dancers. But then committing singly to practising with scores, I came to question both what a work might be and what the basis of a group’s coherence as a group might be. I avoided making choreographic decisions or choices about a ‘work’ as a complete event and I was not aiming for a stylistic ‘sameness’ in the way we all danced but rather saw myself as supporting each dancing soloist to find her dance in her own body, to allow her to dance her body’s dance and to have agency in the shared creation of the dance while dancing with others. I assumed that a group

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1 I am describing the work of choreographer in modern dance terms where that choreographer would work to generate a set of movement values and/or an orginal body.
dance would have some kind of ‘cohesion’ by definition but in this case I was not interested in deliberately trying to bring that about.

In Time and the Dancing Image, American dance critic and author, Deborah Jowitt describes how in modern dance, groups consisted of individuals who were both encouraged to contribute creatively and to be seen as individuals in performance, even while performing common choreography as a group (1988). She describes the ambivalence of Doris Humphrey who valued the virtues of individuals while also expecting them to dance in a way that could be perceived as cohesive in her terms. Humphrey wrote to her parents:

With one hand I try to encourage them to be individuals-to move and think regardless of me or anyone else-and in rehearsal it is necessary to contradict all that and make them acutely aware of each other so that they may move in a common rhythm. (1988, 184)

In my project, the individuality of each dancer was, perhaps, more pronounced. We were not executing learnt or directed choreography. We were improvising and had agency in the generation of our movement.

**Scores**

In Languages of Art, Nelson Goodman discusses the concept of scores as linked to the idea of a stable, repeatable work, and in terms of his distinction between autographic and allographic works of art. Goodman describes a painting as being autographic (1976, 113). It has been painted by one artist and cannot be reproduced unless it is forged. A print made from a plate by an etcher is also autographic even though there can be varying numbers of prints made. The work is always that of the original artist. A piece of music is not autographic, however. According to Goodman it is allographic. It may be written by a composer but it could be interpreted in performance by a different artist: the performer. A dance which has been created by a choreographer is similar to a composed piece of music in that it may be performed by different dancers. In a group improvised dance the questions of whether a dance is autographic or allographic and of the artist are even more complicated. In discussing the importance and significance of a score for a work of art, Goodman suggests that a score could easily be dismissed as not being of any use once a performance is complete. ‘But to take notation as nothing, therefore but a practical aid to production is to miss its fundamental and theoretical role’ (127). A score, according to Goodman, is the means by which a work can be authoritatively identified from performance to performance. A score might also have a more ‘exciting’ function such as aiding composition but its primary role is to identify a work.

The function of scores, in my project, was very different to the function of a score as proposed by Goodman. Rather than standing for something that could be known, remembered and repeated, the scores we used were propositions, the suggestion of a way to notice; a notion to hold on to in order to enter into a state of willingness not to plan or dance in a certain way. In Being Alive, Anthropologist Tim Ingold suggests that ordinary walking is, at once, a way of moving, knowing and describing (2011, xii). Scores worked in our practising in a similar, diffused way. They did not cause us to move in a certain way, but they may have given us a way

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2 Gérard Genette, referring to the work of Goodman describes how an autographic work is often produced in one stage, such as a painting and an allographic work is produced in two stages, such as a musical composition. In the case of an autographic work, the score, produced in the first stage stands for the work produced in the second and ‘...and the act of writing, printing or performing a text or score is for its part an autographic art, whose usually multiple products are physical objects...’ (1997, 17) In the case of an improvised group dance, the score is not created by one author in an autographic way so that it guarantees what the work that it stands for will be. The site at which the ‘creation’ is taking place, rather than in the instance of the single author conceiving the score, occurs as the dancers dance with the scores. This allographic work is produced in two stages but seeing as it is created in its second stage, rather than being interpreted, the authors of it are not one but many.
to start moving. They allowed us to notice, or to observe and perceive how we were dancing and they helped us to describe our dancing experience for ourselves and in communicating about it with our fellow dancers.

**Methodology**

**Practice as Research**

This article is the result of research into my own creative practice. Research into creative practice, often termed ‘practice as research’ suggests a ‘relationship of research between theory and practice’ (Piccini 2002). Practice as research as a methodological approach has become prevalent particularly in the UK and Australia as arts academies have become part of traditional universities and as arts practitioners have increasingly undertaken research and higher degrees using their own creative practice as the starting point for that research (Nelson 2014). In *Practice as Research*, Estelle Barrett suggests that research based in artistic practice allows the possibility for new knowledge to be generated which is personal and can be of benefit to individual artists as well as having the possibility to reveal and be applicable to knowledge in cultural, social and philosophical contexts (2010, 2).

If participating in creative-practice research is about the research within one’s own creative practice, then the necessary reading and writing which also emerges as a practice forms part of that research. The reading and writing that I undertook began with the written experiences of dance improvisation practitioners and allowing those ideas to influence my perception of what was taking place in my own studio practice. Over time I began to read more about ideas which exist outside of dance, such as those of Hannah Arendt, Pierre Bourdieu, and Tim Ingold which came to influence how I perceived our studio practice both in writing about it and in participating in it. The ideas of these authors are discussed further throughout this document.

**Study**

In order to explore what took place over time, and in the becoming of our group, I will first describe the way we practised and the role that scores played in that practising. Each session followed more or less the same structure. We warmed up usually starting by lying on the floor and, each in her own way, coming to standing over time, with the option to go back to the floor if and when we desired. We then worked together with a partner, improvising using touch as a way of sharing physical information. We followed on from that by dancing and watching each other, sometimes as soloists, sometimes dancing concurrent solos. Scores were present, in varying ways, in all phases of our dancing. We started the warm up with my suggestion for a score. As we worked with that score, I would offer, verbally, further suggestions that were arising for me in my own dancing. When we moved to the part of the session in which we touched each other, we would carry on with the ‘theme’ from our warm-up score. In the third section, in which we danced and watched each other, we would use scores that followed on from those we had already been using. An example of a score is the word weight. In the solo warm-up, we could work through what weight might mean in our bodies that day. What was the weight of a particular body part? What was the affect and effect of noticing that weight? In touching each other, we could both give our weight and take the weight of the person we were touching. When we moved into the ‘dancing and watching’ part of the session, weight could be present in our bodies’ memories from all we had experienced so far that session, or we could add in a new score such as drop, ride, follow, push. By using a continually developing score or series of scores in every session, each individual had a starting point for dancing, a way to enter into being attentive to her own dancing. There was no imperative to use all, or indeed any, of the scores introduced. Each
dancer was free to use the scores to begin an exploration which could follow a path that was open and unplanned.

At the end of our three years of practising, our dance was made available to be witnessed by an audience. Our dance was entirely improvised. We had not deliberately worked to dance in a way which made us recognisable as a group performing a shared dance. There was no doubt, however, that now we were a group performing a group dance. What was it that made us a group?

Laurence Louppe, referring to Laban, writes of an individual’s ‘style’ being our uniquely recognisable way of relating to others and the world. ‘Our daily movements and our treatment of proximal space allow the qualitative preferences to appear which not only constitute our relation to the world but more importantly give it an aura.’ (2010, 88) Hubert Godard describes this ‘aura’ as being a combination of the ‘pre-movement’ and gesture (2003, 58). The ‘pre-movement’ is the organization which the body, subject to its history and gravity, makes before any movement takes place. It ‘...determines the state of tension in the body and defines the quality, the specific colour of each gesture.’ (58) A dancer’s dancing history and the way she responds in a sensorial way to a physical situation creates a ‘...“postural muscularity” that will accompany and support, or belie, any conscious gestures.’ (58) Any gesture or movement executed is the way it is, not just from the form or quality of the actual movement, but also because of the complex and hidden organisation which occurs in order for it to take place. This combination of the hidden pre-movement, one the one hand, and visible movement with its more explicit forms and qualities, on the other is particular to each individual. Over time, through dancing, watching and being watched, through accumulating a shared history, and without aiming to do so, the individuals in our group began to develop a shared style. (Millard 2013)

Discussion

One aspect of our emerging shared style, which seemed to be apparent to our dance’s witnesses, was our rhythm. On more than one occasion, during our three-year practice period, people whom we invited to watch us dance recounted their observation of a persistent rhythm in the dancing of the group, even if the speed and the dynamics of our dancing varied. Our emerging shared style included a shared rhythm which came about unintentionally. It was not really until the existence of a shared rhythm was suggested to us by observers that we were even aware that it existed. Our sharing of rhythm was almost exclusively non-conscious but it must have given our dancing a feeling of ‘groupness’ without our having deliberately made that the case, or having surrendered our individual way of dancing to belong to a group.

The use of scores enabled the practising of our group to be structured over a period of time in a way which unified us in dancing and eventually allowed us to become the group which danced a dance. Verbal scores were the mechanism which allowed the meaning of dancing with them to be ever-changing, individual, and undefined while at the same time creating the possibility of our heading towards a common, albeit inconceivable, and never arrived at dancing experience.

Pierre Bourdieu’s concept of ‘habitus’ sheds light on the way our practising with scores over time allowed each of us to come to belong to the group and in doing so, participate in our group dance. Bourdieu observes that:

The structures of a particular type of environment...produce habitus, systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures...and representations which can be objectively ‘regulated’ and ‘regular’ without in any way being the product of obedience to rules, objectively adapted to their goals without presupposing a conscious aiming at ends or an express mastery of the operations necessary to attain them and being all this, collectively
In interacting over time and supported by our regular practice, we came to belong to a community which allowed our group habitus to develop. We adhered to implicit ‘conventions’, not so much because there were articulated and understood social or aesthetic limits or expectations, but because the same dancers gathered, consistently over time, to dance together. The dancing practices and complementary communication structured the way we interacted with each other. Bourdieu’s concept of ‘habitus’ helps to explain and reveal the progressions in the group interactions, including the operations of individual members who were both affected by and affective in their participation in the group in space and time (Bourdieu 1977, 213). We had a group ‘habitus’ because our gathering together to work in a regular and regulated way, for much of the time, excluded the explicit input of and interactions with outsiders.

Tacit understandings built over time became ways of sharing our dancing experiences and ways of moving. An example is our use of touch. Using scores gave rise to multiple possibilities in both touching and dancing. Although it was not my explicit intention, there was a certain way, difficult to accurately describe in words, which involved a rhythm, gentleness and a sort of tenderness that evolved through touching and being touched. I believe that it was the group dancing ‘habitus’ which perpetuated this ‘way’. We were not responding to rules but, rather, to a bodily experience focussed or channelled through touch.

When I noticed that this ‘way’ was emerging from the tactile focus, I became aware that I could take steps to interrupt its passage, either explicitly or through my own touch but I decided that enabling this ‘habitus’ had the possibility to support a shared physical experience which could, in turn, support the possibility for cohesion in the participants’ dancing. The collective orchestration of the ‘habitus’ rather than being directly overseen by a conductor (or choreographer) dispersed communal decision-making. Through that diffuse orchestration, not through anyone’s explicit direction, individuals came to belong to a group.

Each time we gave or received touch in our group, we continued along the path towards what became our ‘way’ of touching, unintentionally creating that path. Bourdieu writes that ‘the habitus is the source of these series of moves which are objectively organized as strategies without being the product of a genuine strategic intention’ (1977, 73). A specific, conscious intention may have an effect but that becomes secondary to the effects of the structuring structures which are already in place. Using rules in the present, such as suggesting something should be done in a certain way, are partially effective against a future outcome which is determined by the conditions in which the action takes place. The scores we used could be thought as being strategies allowing the dancers to be agents as well as members of a group effected by the conditions in which it existed. Although our scores didn’t tell us how to dance, each dancer could use them strategically for her own investigation. However, the objective conditions were formative in terms of the group. Although the possibility always existed to make individual choices in our dancing, there was much more in our dancing than individual choice. Our structuring structures, our ‘habitus’ also formed the group. (Millard 2013)

When we presented our dance to the public, we both danced and watched as spectators alongside the audience enabling a perspective on the dance made through our practising. It was possible in that moment to observe the belonging of each dancer to our group dance. During our period of practice, however, we could neither describe nor fully understand what our group dance was and we could not determine what it would be, even had we wanted to. Bourdieu writes that it is because subjects do not know what they are doing, or what effect each action will have that those actions have ‘more meaning than they know’ (1977, 79). Because we did not plan what our dance would become, we allowed the not knowing to be present in our practising and, in so doing, to find shared meaning, implicitly rather than explicitly, in our dancing together. We did
not rush towards a hoped-for dance, we did not use explicit means to allow us to belong to our group but, rather over time, we built a common understanding.

As well as not having planned what our dance would be, I did not know if a collection of individuals might make a group. Even now, although I have said that we performed a group dance, the definitive aspects of our ‘groupness’ are elusive. At times, when watching each other, we acknowledged that two dancers moved together in a way which seemed complementary but, at other times, the feeling of dancing like another member of the group would rise up in us. We also had our unintentional, yet inescapable, shared rhythm. The real sense of ‘groupness’ was perhaps less and more than those things. It was not reducible to a few moments of recognition, it was ever-present, and was not completely knowable.

It was not my intention at the beginning of my project, to arrive at a way of practising which was the same each session, but that was what occurred over time. After we had spent nearly two years practising in the same way, I believed that I was beginning to understand the significance of that consistency: it supported the dancers sense of agency. I was not directly teaching or even explicitly directing the making of the dance. I felt, however, that I had been able to set up the practice with scores in such a way as it had produced the possibility of our habitus emerging, and thus our style and, ultimately, our group dance. Our group dance was coming into being but it was the practice that was making it, rather than my explicit direction. I felt that all I had to do was to keep organising and facilitating the practice and that ‘the work’ would be wherever we were on the day of performance. I felt pleased that, although I had not known what I was looking for, I had found, in practising over time with scores a way of enabling the coming into being a group dance.

In the very last months of the project, however, things began to change in a way I had not anticipated. The dancers (some in particular) who had given a significant amount of their time and energy to the project began to seem to resent the project or lose interest in dancing in it. There were, throughout the project, times in which I had to work to sustain the commitment of the dancers, particularly because the life of the project was so long, and must have seemed even more so for the dancers who were in their twenties and putting much of their energy into other, important, changing aspects of their lives. But this seemed to be different. Some of the dancers seemed to want more information or direction from me. I had not felt that it was necessary nor desirable to explicitly direct our warming up or dancing, and was not using scores to have a particular effect on either an individual’s dancing or that of the group. I felt that our way of practising was very well established and I imagined that the dancers did not need additional direction since they had themselves participated in the coming into existence of the way we practised. The practice which we had established, not through planning or the projection of an idea but through practising together had come to ‘produce’ our dance rather than me making specific decisions or action to bring that about choreographically. In spending time writing about how our consistent practice had come about and was doing the work of making the dance, I had come to believe that it was what I had said it was, and I could allow it to do its ‘work’ of making the dance, a ‘work’ that, it seemed, I could ‘observe’ as though it were stable.

In The Human Condition, Hannah Arendt describes ‘action’ as being the disclosure of individuals in the social world. Arendt writes that ‘Human plurality, the basic condition of both action and speech has the twofold character of equality and distinction.’(1958, 173) Action is one of the three human activities the other two being labour, corresponding to biological processes, and work which is the fabrication of durable objects. (1958) Each human is distinct from all others and it is this distinction that creates the need for acting and speech. I found this idea of ‘action’ both helpful and pertinent to understanding how we came to work as a group. By expecting the dancers to behave in a certain way, that is to take agency in the creation of the dance and to be active in their own improvisation and dancing experience, I had undermined my own aim, which was to not assume (as a choreographer might) the role of the dancers. At the beginning of the project I had been willing to ‘act’, as described by Arendt, in the practice: that is
‘...to start new unprecedented processes whose outcome remains uncertain and unprecedented...’ (231) But as I began to believe that I knew ‘how’ the dance was being created, I began to see our practice as the single solution to that making. Although I did not have a pre-conceived idea the dance we would perform, I still assumed that some dance needed to come into existence. Although I had not wanted to explicitly direct our dance, I nevertheless organised and shaped a group practice which over time, I believed, would create our dance. When I came to believe that the practice we had was the answer, I stopped acting, that is I stopped participating in the interactions in the group in response to what was actually taking place, and instead conducted the practice sessions according to what I had decided they should be in order for the dance to be made. At a certain point, I could sense that this approach was not working, particularly because the dancers began to lose interest, but I failed to see a solution, because, in reflection, I believed that I had come to understand ‘how’ our dance was being made.

For a few weeks I struggled with how to deal with this new problem. My research into my creative process had led me to believe that I understood what I was doing and the purpose of it and I found it very difficult to come to terms with the fact that doggedly adhering to the practice which I had thought was ‘working’, was actually contradicting the premise on which it was based. I had established a practice of not directing, not teaching, not asserting which, in its rigidity, was just as inflexible a way of creating a work as if I had stipulated every movement a dancer was to make. In order to allow the practice to be itself, I needed to continue to participate, to act as a member of the group. My reading, thinking and writing outside of my participation in the dancing sessions had led me to think I was the ‘historian’ where, according to Arendt, it is an historian and not the actor who is able to see and understand the consequences of deeds and actions: ‘... the process [the actor] starts is never consummated unequivocally in one single deed or event, and its very meaning never discloses itself to the actor but only to the backward glance of the historian who himself does not act.’ (233) Observing and thinking about my project had led me to believe that I knew what it was and how we were creating the dance and that, after we had performed our dance, I would be able to write about what it was. Perhaps if I had stayed outside the making of the dance as an observer and ‘director’ I would be able to definitively say what it was I had made and how I had made it. Because of my choice to be an acting participant in my project, because of my interest in inserting my dancing body into the group, I needed to allow the dance to become what it was, to create itself from the conditions from which it arose, just as I needed to allow the dancers to dance their own dancing and disclose themselves in the interactions of the group.

Arendt writes that ‘...he who acts never quite knows what he is doing, that he always becomes “guilty” of consequences he never intended or even foresaw, that no matter how disastrous and unexpected the consequences of his deed he can never undo it...’(233) By beginning and continuing this project, by organizing a schedule of dancing with scores, I set in motion the building of a practice. While the practice was initiated by me, the dancing/dance did not ‘belong’ to me because there were five other ‘actors’, dancing individuals, who were part of the group that made the dance. My own dancing experience of our practising and our performance, the time dancing and the time thinking and reading and writing which this project consisted of for me, had not provided me with an ‘answer’ or a final knowing but rather a possibility to be attentive to the work of practising.

Conclusion

Practising over time with scores, meeting, dancing with, and watching one another, allowed incremental bodily and dancing changes in each of us. These brought about the creation of our group through supporting the emergence of certain stylistic similarities, such as the unintended shared dancing rhythm discussed above. It was the sameness of our structure in practising over a
significant period of time which allowed these changes both to take place and to be understood and felt.

The becoming of our dance and our group, rather than being planned or deliberate was stitched together through our immersion in practising with scores. By being immersed in this project, each member of the group was part of a dynamic interchange between materials and process, between bodies and dancing. Ingold, writes of inhabiting ‘the open’ and that, rather than being ‘stranded on a closed surface’, it is possible to be part of and be affected by the dynamism in which a body is immersed (2011, 121). That dynamism in my project was in the people, the space, the dancing and the dancing bodies, the repetition and the time spent. We were both affecting and affected by the practice in which we were participating. Through practising we were working on the dancing which was, in turn, part of the structuring structures that were working on our bodies, affecting the way we were dancing and perceiving our dancing. We were also immersed in the ‘weather’ of the entire goings on, particularly the dancing of those with whom we shared the practising and the space. The weather, according to Ingold, is not an object that we are able to perceive but an underwriter for our capacity for perception. (131) ‘As the weather changes, so these capacities vary, leading us not to perceive different things but to perceive the same things differently.’(131) Ingold also writes that in being immersed in the open, ‘…substances and medium are brought together in the constitution of beings that, by way of their activity, participate in the stitching of the textures of the land.’(121) We were disclosing our uniqueness in the ‘open’ of the group in the studio in which our dancing became our dance.
REFERENCES


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