



The New Knowledge

Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker, Deborah Hay and the "Tandem Series" Project

By Helmut Ploebst

In the intensively led debates on the relationship between theory and practice in the context of dance in the past years, concepts and models are currently being implemented that aim at dissolving this old dichotomy. At the Dance Congress 2013 in Düsseldorf, this was revealed, among others, by the presentation of Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker and Bojana Cvejić, moderated by Bettina Masuch, titled 'A Choreographer's Score', by Deborah Hay's lecture 'The Continuity of Discontinuity' and the lab 'The Tandem Series' by Joa Hug and the Artistic Research Lab AREAL.

It remained undisputed that theoretical work in an academic sense is itself a practice. Yet what remains largely excluded from this practice, as the theatre scholar Robin Nelson, University of London, elaborated in his conclusion of the 'Tandem Series', is "the *knowing how*, the doing of things". The Dance Congress focus 'Theory of Practice – Practice of Theory' demonstrated how theoretical material is generated from artistic practice and how, according to a formulation by Nelson, "ideas or theoretical considerations are fed into and worked through by a bodily process".

In his conversation with Faustin Linyekula at the beginning of the Dance Congress, Jean-Luc Nancy said: Philosophy is not the speech that can attend to a subject matter to lend it meaning. Philosophy consists in approaching something that is given in our experience. It seeks to give the word to experience." Nancy thus corresponds with an intervention by the philosopher Mónica Alarcón during the contribution "Embodied Knowledge" which she made together with Joa Hug in the 'Tandem Series'. With red lipstick she wrote Edmund Husserl's motto of phenomenology on a studio mirror: "Zu den Sachen selbst! (To the things themselves!)" For Deborah Hay, these things are the "cellular body", for Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker the given choreographic work and for Nelson "practice as research".

Together with the music scholar and dramaturge Bojana Cvejić, De Keersmaeker in 2012 published the book 'A Choreographer's Score' dealing with her early works 'Fase', 'Rosas danst Rosas', 'Elena's Aria' and 'Bartók's String Quartet No. 4'. A further book on her most recent pieces, 'En attendant' and 'Cesena' will be published in 2013. With these publication projects that consist of texts, image material and DVDs De Keersmaeker sought to convey her work for pedagogical purposes, for research and for the dance audience: "When I met William Forsythe a while ago, who was just working on Motion Bank, he offered various possibilities to support me. That was an encouragement. I have never developed methods and systems. Everything – the discovery and the development of systems – took place in processes of creating and searching. I was trained as a dancer and never learnt choreography. That was a process that generated itself."

A concept was therefore developed on how the theoretical content in De Keersmaeker's pieces could be "elicited" as knowledge of her artistic practice. "It was important to find out how the work could be conveyed without oral-mimetic displaying in the studio," Cvejić explains. "And I thought it would be interesting not to reduce it to a technique, but to approach it as a score, in which the issue is not a complete reconstruction. Instead, an insight into the genealogy, into the various techniques of the work would become possible." According to Cvejić, both publications are about

“reading a narrative and learning how someone has learned – to read a sort of autodidactic process of becoming a choreographer in a way that dance-specific knowledge can also be translated into other fields.”

Continuity of Discontinuity

A book project also formed the basis of the Dance Congress lecture by the American choreographer and former member of the Judson Dance Theater, Deborah Hay, titled ‘The Continuity of Discontinuity. Readings about Non-linear Learning’. In her introduction, the dance scholar Pirkko Husemann said: “For 43 years her research has been based on the observation and realization that all of us are both consciously and unconsciously choreographed, by culture, gender, politics, job, history, art, the list continues. Her interest as a choreographer is not to maintain or refine or introduce new choreography into the world but rather to destabilize our learned behavior that keeps us all in place. The material for her research is the cellular body that she is the first to admit is impossible to grasp. Yet the translation of this material is the basis of her teaching, her practice, performance, and the discourse that brings her here today.”

For the book on the continuity of discontinuity, which she is working on, Deborah Hay selected excerpts of her dance notebooks which she has been writing since 1970. Hay ironically stated: “At the time it was said that the human body consists of 5 million cells, later on 50 billion and finally 50 trillion or now a zillion cells, that is really from scientific publications.”

“In 1970 I left New York”, Hay said. „And I held three beliefs about myself: 1. dance technique was not something I could bring myself to master; 2. my intellect was grossly inadequate; and 3. I did not know how to engage in research. To this day I don’t know how to use a library. I moved to Northern Vermont and began reconfiguring my three dimensional body into a cellular body. Whatever that means, the tyranny of my three beliefs began to disappear. And what replaced it, was an experience of faith in my whole body at once as my teacher. Faith is the deeply felt conviction that everything is possible including the possibility that this is not possible.”

To illustrate this, here are ten examples from Hay’s notes consisting of comments and her famous “What if” questions. Hay uses “I” when she relates her own experiences and “You” when she conveys a thought to others:

- “My practice of performance is how I learn without thinking.” (2008)
- “Your practice of performance involves an ever expanding network of perceptual activity.” (2001)
- “My body is capable of so much more than what it can do.” (2006)
- “What if every cell in your body at once has the potential to perceive your loyalty to dance and your disinterestedness in this loyalty at the same time?” (2000)
- “What if I turn from movement per se as the primary component of making dances replacing it with my bodily perception of space and time? Will this suffice as the two primary components in a choreographic work?” (2001)
- “What if I call my movement ‘my music’?” (2001)
- “What if how you use time, is personal? In this way, time is in your hands. Your perception of time is personal, while your perception of space is temporal.” (2001)
- “What if every cell in my body at once has the potential to perceive beauty and to surrender beauty both at once and each and every moment?” (2001)
- “What if every cell in my body at once has the potential to perceive the uniqueness and the originality of all there is? The unique and the original are the poetic counterpoints of space and time.” (2002)
- “What if dance is how and where we practice relationship? With your whole body at once in relationship to the space where you are dancing in relationship to each passing moment, in relationship to your audience? What if the depth of this question is on the surface?” (2010)

How we know what

Anne Teresa De Keersmaecker and Deborah Hay demonstrated the formulation of theory as it emerged from their respective practices, from the "things", so to speak. The 'Tandem Series' aimed at merging theory and practice. It was organised by the Artistic Research Lab Berlin / AREAL based on a concept by the dancer and researcher Joa Hug.

After the keynote 'How do we know?' On the Methodology of Practice as Research' by the British theatre scholar Robin Nelson, three "tandems" conducted theoretical and practical exercises with different approaches in their workshops. The choreographer and Feldenkrais practitioner Katja Münker and the cultural theorist Ralph Fischer worked on "walking as a cultural practice" (Fischer). In a final Wrap Up, Nelson said: "This project was about a new experience of our everyday environment." Under the title "Shifting the Human: Touching Matter", the dancer and researcher Paula Kramer worked together with the philosopher Wallace Heim on the body in eco-space. Nelson explained: They sought to draw our attention to how our relationships shift – not only to each other but to the multitude of also-others, in an ethical dimension also in regard to the material environment."

The philosopher Mónica Alarcón and the dance researcher Joa Hug, finally, in their philosophical approach to the body, traced an "embodied knowledge" via the experience of touching each other, something which all people have in themselves: In the form of a "manipulation score" (Hug) framed by a phenomenology (Alarcón) in and around the body.

"In *Practice as Research* we are looking for the right words to talk about what takes place in the dialogical encounter between words and action," Nelson with reference to the Tandem project on his approach to a new knowledge methodology: "One cannot transport what takes place in a process of touching in texts, for example. Here, body knowledge and book knowledge come together in a synaptic connectedness across the body-mind." In this sense, according to the view of the observer of the contributions by De Keersmaecker, Hay and the 'Tandem Series', doing and thinking appeared to enter into a synthesis from their antipodal relationship, something which can deepen both action and reflection.

Literature (selection):

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