

Choreographing Empathy

Tags:

#empathy

#choreography

#pain

#cognition

**a transcript of a conversation that didn't happen this way, an exercise in choreographing text, a series of notes for an ongoing research on somatic practices and speculative fiction*

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MT: I think empathy is profound because it's connected to somatic experience. I started wondering what my role was: we all identify with our art through dance, through that work I identify myself as me. I can't separate that. So I wondered: what can I do with that art on a societal level, what can I contribute.

MK: How can this project be useful?

NG: How can it be empathetic?

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AJ: For me that's an interesting compositional procedure - to put oneself in the position of another, but then problems arise: who am I to imagine how someone else feels and why should I. We all identify as women and for us it's a very imposed term because we are expected to be empathetic in a certain way. And it's very unclear, but it's here and harasses us.

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LH: Putting myself in that position is maybe depriving me of the possibility to see that someone else is living through something else, while my compassion comes through identifying with something that may not be it, or otherwise, gives me a possibility of understanding that maybe I don't understand.

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NG: The fact that empathy is key to understanding and learning is becoming more widely accepted. The main way in which we obtain knowledge is predisposed by our capacity to empathise. First, we collect information from our relations with others and other worlds. Finally, it's becoming affirmed that all of this is together, all these brains are together.

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MT: In dance I still learn to stop, wait, listen, let go, catch, every day anew. We as dancers are trained to empathize on a different level - not necessarily through compassion - but by comprehending and putting ourselves in others' positions. We're *seeing differently* on a practical level, every day when training and performing. That's why I think it would be great to try and make a method out of it, but not by withdrawing to ourselves.

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IR: I'm trying to relate this with my experience of working through shiatsu or counseling because there I have to establish relations with clients through breathing, body language, or a pose, but it is my decision to connect profoundly so our fields can overlap. This empathetic field is intangible and indescribable, but it's very real. I enter communication from that state of empathy. And there is something performative about it - the moment in which I decide to continue providing trust. It seems to me that verbalizing and compassion are performative: I show you what is compassionate, but what I feel is empathetic.

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NG: The examples used in the book¹ were not referential for us from the start, but we chose to connect somatic and fictional, precisely because that has the capacity to create a certain state of increased receptivity. It was a decision to call it choreographing empathy and combine something very concrete, with its specific techniques and knowledges, and let fiction in. It's a very speculative term and maybe that's why we're using different words to talk about similar concepts....

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ZU: I think choreographing empathy is an oxymoron because if choreography is a practice of composition and manipulation, and empathy is a state of receptivity and openness, then how does it work?

MK: I also wondered about it as an oxymoron. On the one hand, the question is what could be socially useful, but the proposal is to use the experience of empathy - the physical sensation in the body - for a movement or choreography to happen. That can become very abstract and lose connection with its origin. Only when something completely fictional is introduced into something so real and personal, for me it becomes choreography.

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LH: If we consider choreography as setting conditions for something to happen, it's clear that empathy is not some fixed thing one has or doesn't have. I have that ability, but sometimes the question is where I in my capacity am and what are the tools and ways at my disposal. Maybe sometimes I can't relate to so many things and information that require empathy. Regarding choreographing empathy, the question is how do I set conditions to make that available. In the sense of somatic practices, where the assumption

¹ Susan Leigh Foster, *Choreographing Empathy: Kinesthesia in Performance*.

is that we all have the same tissue and cells, we can understand that we share the same skin. Maybe that is a sort of empathy - when I work with my own skin, I understand all skin.

AJ: There's a book that says otherwise that we're all different. But the fact that we're different doesn't mean we're not cooperative. I wonder what it means that we're all the same because nobody knows how someone else really feels. Precisely this learning about differences, in the sense of allowing for those differences, is most interesting. The author talks about physical processes, about how our bodies are different, always differently primed. We as a species are always taking care of preserving that physical body and everything else is an upgrade. This preservation of life is making sure that the body doesn't end up in too big of a crisis and dies.

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NG: There's a tension in the argument that one has to experience something to know about it, while on the other hand, empathy is a principle of cognition, as fiction is too. Already Aristotle talked about tragedy as producing compassion and fear. The idea of affect is here since the arts have existed, or at least the idea that fictional experiences are as effective as lived experiences.

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ZU: First we had the relation between capacity and action, and now capacity and experience - do I have to have a certain similar experience to be able to empathize?

MT: Some people can only empathize after they've had a certain experience. (...) Maybe I was bothered by the societal dimension because for me it happens when I watch performances. Precisely those that create conditions for me to experience something, notice, learn, conditions good enough for me to receive all that.

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AJ: I wonder if we experience empathy with all works when a neuronal mirroring occurs. What is empathy for us, which levels does it operate on? (...) Some works put performers in positions which simply perpetuate what is problematic anyway. For me it happened with a work by a certain famous author in Documenta. He put performers in conditions which reflected hard working conditions: they performed in darkness, worked 6 days a week, 6 hours per day, and they were paid averagely. They performed a content which only served the work itself and was performatively banal: they performed a pop song and danced a simple choreography which was outsourced from pop culture. There was nothing interesting about it and it was very repetitive. Obviously, it dealt with modes of work production as such by putting the performers in a certain (work-ers') position, but there was no counterbalance to that kind of treatment. The author didn't make any gesture to question that. Something should have happened to overturn that so that one could think about it, but instead, it was merely perpetuating what was happening.

MT: I had an experience a few years back when I felt something between that kind of perpetuation and empathy, but the experience of empathy happened with real people. The director wanted to explore a social problem through art, and on stage it became fiction and an oxymoron. Research-oriented

processes remain alive, and one gets a different experience that, to me, is more substantial than the product. Just like empathy. Simply being with them was enough to change something for me. I didn't have to represent it.

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NG: What about works that do something productive in the sense of choreographing empathy?

LH: For me music does it more often. I don't know why. When I watch an animated film, I empathize with the characters more than in a live performance. I don't know why.

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IR: All durational works give me perfect conditions for peeling layers off, observing, being attentive, thinking, feeling, I like that. (...) And your work in the Museum of Contemporary Art, Zrinka, did that for me too. It was very delicate. It worked with my attention in a similar manner as some durational pieces do, which was to see, assume, become aware and go lower. There was a lot of choreographing empathy there for me. I had a feeling of connectedness with you and your processes, but I also know some of them - not just artistic ones. All the time there was a mixture of joy for you and your work, for your process, for the moment you are in, looking forward to what is to come, love for what was before.

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ZU: I remembered works by Andreja Kulunčić and Selma Banich. Selma makes very activist works with the wish to change the world. Andreja does, too. Andreja's work choreographs my empathy, or rehearses my ability to empathize, because it unfolds, doesn't give me statements, doesn't school me (at least I don't have the feeling it does) nor does it give me conclusions. Okay, sometimes it gives me conclusions. It opens up possibilities for my thinking and feeling and then I can find my position and see how to go about it.

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AJ: For me it's a bunch of works, but they don't have to be political. Especially speech performances in which empathy is created through questions.

NG: I'm thinking of a work I haven't experienced, but only heard about it. When her sister died, the artist recorded sounds of herself crying. The whole work was just that, the durational sound of that mourning. I'm trying to imagine it, it seems like a very interesting procedure, but I can't think of being in that state and then using it for artistic purposes. I don't have an opinion about it, it just seems totally uncanny.

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MT: Shall we try to wrap up? I like that we concluded it's an oxymoron and I'd love to try this kind of impossible thing. It's not very clear yet.

