

After 'Knowledge Society' - Personal Perspective on Somatics (October 2013)

For the last couple of weeks, I have been busy reading about the historical underpinnings of somatics as a field of study and movement education, its development and its research/academic achievements and challenges, all fired with enthusiasm. I would like to take my time now, and talk/write, in a bit more organised and collected way, about my personal findings and impressions coming from this introductory body of literature on somatics and give it my today's perspective feedback as well as some direction for my future work as dance researcher and somatic movement practitioner/educator. First, I will present my feedback to somatics as a field in relation to my personal professional history, then I will move to my feedback in relation to research-oriented approaches to somatics and my personal interests in particular ways of working with movement.

To start with, in my own versatile practice (as a dramaturge, dance researcher, and dance maker) I have been always struggling with a buzzing sound of: 'Who are you, really?' question. Whenever I could, it has been much easier to twist the question into its active form and describe what I actually do. I would then say: 'I work with movement, practically, conceptually and methodologically', then I would give examples, and yet that would stir up new curiosity, leading to a ritual-like stamp

question of: ‘So, you are a dancer, right?’ ... I never know how to follow up on that question; unfortunately (...), I improvise, making my mood my jumping board. And so, generally speaking, the culture of categorisations has had a hard time with me, all along.

Having read about the pioneering work of people like Elsa Gindler, Frederick Alexander, Moshe Feldenkrais, Ida Rolf, Charlotte Selver, Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen, Mary Whitehouse, Thomas Hanna, Don Hanley Johnson and more current (and better known to me) work of Martha Eddy, Anna Halprin, Maxine Sheets Johnstone, Sondra Fraleigh and others, it is interesting to realise, that the work with movement being multidisciplinary, multi-cultural and often stirred by various physical or identity related limitations is a common denominator after all, and that its holistic approach bears many names and individual approaches.

Martha Eddy writes herself, describing the historical underpinnings of somatic work, that: “the field of ‘somatics’ is barely a field” (Eddy 2009) and that when thinking of it as one, she likens it to “a field of wildflowers with unique species randomly popping up across wide expanses.” (Eddy 2009) I particularly like that comparison in relation to how the field gets shaped up. It underlines its direct relation to movement, and its indescribable, free-flowing and individual realities, that do not resemble any systematic, academic field of study in its regular development. It also underlines the fact that somatics grows from very practical, individual points of view, from studio work, from different scenarios of accessing bodily awareness and so it is a naturally and organically shaped process of real life experiences and not a set of pre-organised approaches for ‘further disciplinary development’ of conceptual thinking.

It is very important to me to note that, especially since I did come to dance and movement through an intense period of theoretical, mostly philosophical education, and so it is also a new occasion for me to re-examine the related to it phenomenological philosophy from a 'legitimate' (within somatic approach) practical stance of my own studio work. Something, I have not had any chance of doing within my previous academic environments that were lacking valid methods of combining theory and practice. And so, as far as my own academic interests are concerned, being able to refer to my own movement practice, I would then plan to return to where I finished off in my theoretical explorations on various strands of Husserlian thought in my MA thesis on "Dynamic Composing - on choreographic processes of conceptualisation as a way to artistic knowing" (Dako 2010) and continue my practical understanding of the epistemological quest I have set myself on there. A new understanding, that, informed by somatic approach, would be oriented less around knowing for the sake of knowing (or scholarship) but more for the sake of grasping the value of knowledge (and somatic awareness) in influencing the condition of peoples' conscious lives, life choices and even ethics, which is so needed in today's rapidly changing world of human (forward) expansion. The condition that has been lost back along the industrial revolution and when people, advancing the technological development, became to mirror themselves as machines controlled by the ever powerful mind, as it was portrayed, and acting against their own embodied nature and following Descartes. And I do not mean that in a philosophical way only. [The tendency to think and work with the head only has literally entered peoples' ways of life, work and physicality in a very visible way. I have to say, one of my hobbies of leisure time, which I used to consider a great entertainment as a young girl

but now I can appreciate from a different perspective, was to watch people on the street. I would spend hours sitting in the window and watching, hoping for rain, or other ‘abnormal’ street situation that would make people behave very funny, kicking them out of their physical comfort zones. It has been hilarious to watch people handle a trip over, or a run for safety in the pouring rain, or a rushing pace trying to make it before a vehicle. These were the situations informing me that people don’t think their bodies enough, they don’t appreciate them, but on the contrary see them as a side effect they have to handle and make up for mentally, as if their body was good for carrying their head only...]

Impressed by the life-work of people like Anna Halprin for example I have realised that knowledge and awareness are not about making the theories about human consciousness more and more complicated and communicated in written philosophical texts filled with academic jargon, but on the contrary, it is about simple listening that precedes all thought and stirs all the ‘natural’ action. And, as a somatic work practitioner, it has also become clearer to me that the somatic approach toward a more proprioceptive life applies especially to the western world of linear, time-managed progression, and that it opens up ways in which this expansive approach could be enriched and modified for better, more humanistic, more holistic and more embodied life experiences.

Continuing that thought, I am now able to associate somatics and its potentially immense importance and influence on modern societies to the revolutionary effect that modern dance has turned out to make on classical dance education and which, consequently, helped rethink dance as an art form. Somatic work, in my view, is much more than an educational or therapeutic way of working with the body, it is a way of

life and a valid alternative to the often harmful and de-humanising ways of western life oriented around constant progress, quick fix medicine and comfort. And again, I can see how the introductory literature on the work of somatic pioneers have opened my eyes from being able to see my work valid only within artistic, theatrical and movement-research based professional environments to a larger-scale application and larger-scale accessibility workshops that first and foremost concentrate on the every-day need for conscious somatic awareness, psycho-physical integration and synergetic (here, relating to Thomas Hanna's (Hanna 1986) principle of synergy) well-being for the benefit of ourselves and the environments we live in.

The somatic awareness of the ever active and pre-reflective bodily selves appear to me as a crucial condition and predisposition for what Husserl implied in his own work describing “systematic *reflection* as a research method” (Eckartsberg 1986) and which calls for further study and development. It is this reflection, that Husserl himself knew extends to the realm of the implicit and transcendental and which, to him, could be best studied in every-day activities and taken-for-granted common activities, and which to me, becomes even more distinct in the studio work with movement as the main data-source and an occasion (alike in Romanyshyn's work) to recover human psycho-physical life as a “reality of meaningful personal meaning-making activity” (Eckartsberg 1986).

I would thus see movement based research and communication as the basic way of entering the deep levels of understanding ourselves and the world around us and a method of what Eckartsberg calls ‘interpretative dialogue’ or a ‘spiralling hermeneutic’ that “opens up and differentiates the field of investigation and thus makes possible a deepened understanding and appreciation of the complexity and the

essentially elusive, suggestible, narrative and metaphorical nature of human psychological life” (Eckartsberg 1986).

In my own practice as a mover, and dance film maker I have been always more concerned about making my productions real, than making them good, in term of applying to different standards of production or reception. Those exceptional moments of creating the real movement (and the moving experience) come and go. They can never be repeated. That is why in my practice I work only with improvised movement. It is quite demanding because working with the camera normally involves a thoroughly scripted approach. I do not follow that. I prefer to spend tones of additional hours in the editing stage when I really compose and create, than to lose those moments in favour of a pre-choreographed and framed shot. The resulting picture is not a puzzle put together in a synced way then but a layered, synergetic composition that creates itself. This is where I think my approach shares a lot with the somatic inner awareness and self-study that underpin the authenticity of expression in movement. And it is also within the somatic approach that I would like to develop my other research interests in concepts of abstraction (or self-abstraction) and heterogeneity in relation to the transformational processes involving thought, image, movement and its (psycho-physical) realisation. Abstraction is a beautiful concept that escapes definition. It is alike somatic inquiry and dance as Martha Eddy is writing that share ineffable and which Feldenkrais called “the elusive obvious” (Eddy 2009) and which I would like to relate to Jung’s concept of active imagination.

And since I already mentioned my past limitations within my research work relating to inclusion of the studio work as a valid way of working with theoretical concepts, I would like to bring back some words of conclusion from my paper on choreographic

(here understood in the broader sense as artistic or creative) processes as a way of epistemological inquiry (Dako 2010) and reconsider it against Reason and Rowan's paper on "Issues of validity in new paradigm research" (Reason & Rowan 1981). In my paper I have written, relating to Sabine Gehm work, that: (Gehm, Husemann & Wilcke 2007)

Dance research changes the status of knowledge as static and reusable commodity to momentary, fleeting knowledge of a short encounter, shifting its status thus to something difficult to handle, store or manage. This 'paradigm shift' (Kuhn 1962) implicitly reveals also that "there is no linear development in the progress of knowledge" (Gehm, Husemann & Wilcke 2007) and that dance reinterprets the known process of knowledge through syncopation, asymmetry and performative potentials in making a perceptive difference and 'evoking moments of enchantment' (Gehm, Husemann & Wilcke 2007) "It is a venture into areas that can no longer only be comprehended in terms of controllable and operationalised knowledge – the field of the unforeseeable, the unknowable, the uncontrollable" (Gehm, Husemann & Wilcke 2007) which expands beyond informational knowledge through the complexity of experience involved and which comprises of "individual mixture of memory, knowledge, perception, anticipation, and desire" (Gehm, Husemann & Wilcke 2007).

I have brought this quote up because I was describing here the notion of constructing and understanding knowledge and yet I would now like to relate it to Schwartz and Ogilvy's notion of *perspective*, as a way of looking and receiving knowledge. I find it a very powerful, and yet, despite being present in arts for centuries, a very neglected notion that is now entering research paradigms. It is a notion that eliminates

objective-subjective dualism of thinking and brings a bit more creative (alluding to the process of artistic creation) tune to the process of conducting research. It also goes along and relates to a post-dramatic developments following Barthes's 'death of the author' influence, which brings back the element of shared experience of meaning making processes and puts forward the released from dualistic terminology concept of a creative subjectivity and relationship. Reason and Rowan write that we have to learn to "view reality as a process, always emerging through a self-contradictory development, always becoming; reality is neither subject nor object, it is both wholly independent of me and wholly dependent on me".

I can thus relate this new developments to research in what has already been present in the choreographic work of the described by me work of Bruno Listopad (Dako 2010) but also other choreographers including the work of Pina Bausch who has always been working on a very intersubjective level with her dancers and whose creative input has been shaping the final work all along. It is this intersubjectively valid knowledge that is exceeding the limitations of one knower that a new heterogenetic epistemology within research needs (as described by Reason and Rowan) and which has already been shaping within dance and choreographic research structures. Reason and Rowan further write that in terms of research, "accepting, allowing, encouraging, and celebrating heterogenetic viewpoints will lead to an increase in our understanding" (Reason & Rowan 1981), and that it is grounded in personal encounter with experience and encounter with other people.

It is also the same approach that the somatic work with movement is promoting and which is so capable in bringing up amazing results in making the 'invisible dimension' visible and which builds on compassion, open-mindedness to shared

engagement, and deep awareness. This developing need for intersubjectively acquired knowledge puts forward yet another phenomenon that underscores the somatic approach, i.e. its unavoidably suggestive cultural shift that is currently happening, from national to the worldwide perspective. And considering the described above beginnings of somatic approach that were induced by transmigration, this is yet another powerful tool that the somatic approach toward research encompasses.

In conclusion, I would then like to repeat that it is due to somatic studio work, which has already influenced new trends of research and experiential data appreciation, that a new approach to the epistemological standpoint oriented around the usefulness and shared illumination (and not imposing truthfulness) has started. Informed mostly by dance and movement research, and staying open to all other culturally variant psycho-physical activities and approaches, somatics is on the verge of escaping becoming another structured field of study that eventually burns out its own success. On the contrary, due to its healthy approach and common trust and compassion based value denominator, I hope it grows in its divergent patterns of differentiation creating an ever active epistemic culture which extends in relation to social environments and keeps redefining the possible forms of holistically-human knowledge.

Personally, I do hope it develops in close contact with community arts where it can be enriched contextually by artistic, social and cultural feedbacks and where acute artistic skills are less of an importance than the true celebration of creative potentials hidden in all of us, and which can only be accessed through the depth of personal inner knowledge that we are often not aware of when working in isolation. And I do hope it means we are entering a new academic era of open research studios.

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