

Embracing a Precarious Life

Clara Sjölin

ABSTRACT

This article presents research focused on the precarious life of an independent dance artist in a European context. The aim of this study was to identify ways to understand and cope with the various unstable aspects of the lifestyle and profession of independent dance artists. Together with a group of fellow dance artists, I explored understandings of instability and stability and investigated how collective action might reinforce a sense of stability. I position this study in relation to current economic trends in which the individual is increasingly in focus, with few social security benefits, and the dancer is often faced with solitary living and working situations. I applied a performative, practice-led research methodology supported by feminist post-human theories. The findings led to discussions of the complexity and entanglement of stability and instability, which evolved into a joint phrasing of in/stability, in which I explored how the fluid practice of dance corresponds with not only a wider socio-political landscape but also an ever-changing world.

SAMMANFATTNING

Denna artikel delar med sig av forskning med fokus på den osäkerhet frilansande danskonstnärer i en europeisk kontext befinner sig i. Forskningen söker efter att förstå och hantera de olika instabila aspekterna som följer med livsstilen och yrket som frilansande danskonstnär. Tillsammans med en grupp andra danskonstnärer har jag utforskat vår förståelse av instabilitet och stabilitet, och undersökt hur kollektiv handling kan förstärka känslan av stabilitet. Jag placerar denna studie i relation till nuvarande ekonomiska trender där individen är alltmer i fokus, med få sociala rättigheter, och där dansaren ofta ställs inför solitära levnads- och arbetssituationer. Jag tillämpar en performativ, praktikledd forskningsmetodik och har stöd av feministiska posthumana teorier. Resultaten leder till diskussioner om komplexiteten och sammanflätningen av stabilitet och instabilitet, som utvecklades till den sammanslagna formuleringen in/stabilitet, där jag diskuterar hur den flytande danspraktiken överensstämmer med sociopolitiska strukturer men också med en ständigt föränderlig värld.

Embracing a Precarious Life

Clara Sjölin

Is consistency outdated?

In this text, I share my thoughts on dance, drawing from my MA thesis research, in which my initial interest was to investigate how coming together as a group could contribute to feelings of stability. I explored this question by inviting a group of five dance artists to a dance studio setting. I scheduled weekly gatherings with them over a period of five weeks, in which we danced, talked, and reflected together. I attempted to create a consistent group in which everyone participated in each session, as I thought consistency would contribute to feelings of stability. The reality differed from my initial plan. The people present in each gathering changed, some cancelled at the last minute, and we did not manage to be all together, not even once. I was challenged by a fluctuating group, and I had to think of last-minute solutions, be flexible, and adapt to the situation. The commitment that I imagined was clearly not achievable.

I asked myself, *If the gatherings can continue, how do I imagine them happening, maybe in a different way?* and replied to myself, Maybe by pushing harder to have a consistent group. As I looked back at what I had written, I began to think that the statement seemed domineering and made me question why I wanted a consistent group. If I continued to be disappointed with the reality of this not working out, should I just drop that ambition? I began to consider that, in the freelancing world, having a consistent team to work with is a near impossibility. This led me to ask questions, such as *How might it be possible to redefine and look at stability in a dance artist's life in a new way? How can stability be explored without seeking to copy the structure of full-time employment as it is*

'usually' structured? How can we, as dance artists, create a structure for coming together that contributes a sense of stability yet matches our fluid lives? On the other hand, this line of thinking made me hesitate and wonder: *Am I suggesting that there is a need to 'give in' to neoliberalist norms of work?*

Theoretical framework

In my research, I applied a performative, practice-led research methodology in which I explored the topic of in/stabilities in a dance studio setting in two contexts: the first being the gatherings with a group of dance artists, as outlined above, and the other in my teaching context where I offered evening dance classes for adults and an improvisation class for professional dancers. My analysis process is supported by the post-humanist theory on diffraction (Barad 2014), in which I attempt to go beyond binary thinking and see the knowledge produced as entangled and interfering with itself. For me, that means not viewing stability and instability as a mere dichotomy. At first, I attempted to counteract instabilities with stability, as I saw them as opposing each other, but through the lens of diffraction, I began to notice the complexity of both and how they are intertwined with one another, which led me to adopt the joint phrasing of in/stability.

To further understand my thinking around the queries on in/stabilities that I am raising, I will offer some of the literature mapping out two key concepts of this research—the precariat and artistic nomadism.

One could say that freelance dance artists belong to the social class called precariat. Cecilie Ullerup Schmidt (2018) defines the precariat as 'A precarity

based on short-term contracts, being one's own boss and own employee, performing social and geographical flexibility, having freedom to follow one's desires and to decide the rhythm of work, and only a few social rights, if any' (8). Expanding on the idea offered by Ullerup Schmidt, Alexandra Kolb (2013) describes how the economy has shifted from industrial mass production, in which workers passively do as they are told, to a creative workforce that aligns with artists' precarious and flexible situation. Artists and cultural workers have long been models of the precarious worker, who has emerged as a consequence of neoliberal working conditions. Hence, Kolb explains that artists' long-established bohemian lifestyle and outsider status in society have now become the norm in current employment practices (Kolb 2013).

The precariat comes with a geological flexibility, which Jenny Roche (2018) draws attention to through the concept of artistic nomadism. Artistic nomadism can be observed in the format of international art residencies in which the infrastructure that emerges enables – and assumes – mobility but often does not meet the need for financial support to create art. State-funded support is usually organised on a project basis, which also makes it difficult for artists to create a continuous and financially secure existence. The requirement of the nomadic artist contributes to the difficulty of making a living from art in the area in which one resides (Roche 2018). Constant travelling and engagement in different artistic projects become a demand and an expectation placed on the artist (Van Assche 2017).

The idea of nomadism can also be discussed regarding the actual practice of an artist. Moving between identities by entering multiple selves (Colin 2015) is argued to be embedded in the practice of an artist. Noyale Colin (2015) highlights how artists in collaboration can practice a distribution of attention and presence that takes them beyond a singular 'I'. In collaborative dance improvisation, the dance that emerges is relational and rhizomatic (Deleuze and Guattari 1988), revealing the relationship between the

self and others. Such ideas of nomadism are in line with the thinking of theorist Rosi Braidotti (2013).

The theories on the life of dance artists just discussed correspond very well to my own lived experiences of being situated in this lifestyle and profession. The experiences that I carry with me have been the main driver to carry out this research, and the literature has informed and supported the research throughout. Below, I will further raise some perhaps provocative thinking that goes in line with the discoveries I have made and intend to discuss.

Implications for the practice of dance

The whole logic of the neoliberalist market can be further reflected in the dancing itself. Meghan Quinlan (2017) discusses the link between neoliberalism and somatic work by defining Gaga as a neoliberal metatechnique in which the understanding of technique, choreography, and improvisation is blurred. Gaga is perhaps one of the most sought-after training methods in the dance market today, and its focus on being able to switch between different dance styles is what is expected of a dancer today (Quinlan 2017). Rather than specialising in one dance technique, it is becoming more common for dancers to know different movement styles – and also to be creative – and to have an ease with improvisation and their own personal creation, in order to meet a competitive industry and satisfy the various aspirations of choreographers (Quinlan 2017).

One explanation for why dancers have become 'neoliberalist' workers is the structure of funding bodies. Choreographers usually receive their financial support on a project basis and are therefore rarely able to employ their dancers on a full-time basis, forcing dancers to work for other choreographers, and because each choreographer has their own way of working, style, and preferences, the dancer becomes a fluid, neutral, and willing worker (Roche 2018). The dancer has gone from being the ideal advocate of a particular technique to one who 'incorporates multiple "aesthetic regimes"' (Roche 2018, 154).

Researcher Claudia Brazzale (2014) draws a connection between a dancer's way of moving and neoliberalist political logic, as she discusses the kinetic mobility of the dancer being not only a requirement in dance technique 'but a fundamental aspect of a dancer's being-in-the-world' (111). A dancer's skill to *travel through space* – finding freedom and mastering the space through the moving body – transforms, according to Brazzale, into a geographical and social mobility, and prepares the dancer for transnational, cosmopolitan success based on a nomadic lifestyle. Brazzale (2014) speaks of a romanticised artistic nomadism, which in fact 'aligns with current neoliberal logic organised around the production of mobile subjects' (109).

Dance improvisation and not knowing

Before addressing the theories presented above in relation to my findings, I return to the gatherings I arranged and the idea of consistency not working out. When I ask myself if I should find more flexibility in the way I organise, I realise that I struggle to balance being adaptable and having high ambitions, because for me, ambitions often come with certain expectations. I therefore ask myself how I can think big and make plans while still learning to deal with disappointment if it does not turn out the way I wanted. Even if I were a 'fluid dancing subject' (Roche 2018, 2) ready to adapt to the particular requirements of a choreographic work, I still feel I have a way to go in learning to deal with unexpected changes. For dancers to have open minds in creative processes, Roche explains, 'According to Vonmoos (15 September 2016), this openness includes being "ready to try whatever will come through the process...[and] letting go of expectations"' (Roche 2018, 13).

During the gatherings with the collective of dance artists, 'not knowing' was a phrase that appeared many times. In the last gathering, I asked myself and the participants: *What have these gatherings done for*

you? and I replied, writing down: *My skills in being spontaneous/coming up with tasks/adapting were improved and resulted in me feeling at peace with not knowing.* As I observed what I had written, I began to use 'not knowing' as a way to describe the instabilities of the life of a dance artist. Not knowing on a macro level might relate to the work structure in which our lives are situated and the financial worries that come with it. In creative processes, part of the journey tends to involve not always knowing how the work will develop.

As my research moved away from the gatherings and into my teaching context, I began to explore the overarching theme around in/stabilities in movement. I developed various dance improvisation tasks that explored being in/out of balance, risk-taking, trust, decision-making, openness and availability, and individuality and autonomy. I explored these tasks in two contexts: with my students in the evening classes for adults that I offer, and in an open improvisation class for professionals. What I discovered was that dance improvisation as a general practice continuously teaches you the ability to cope with the state of not knowing. As one enters a dance improvisation, a key aspect is the practice of staying in the present moment and letting oneself be taken where the dance goes. To improvise is to follow impulses and to stay spontaneous and flexible, and as one dances with others, the ability to listen in and actively trying not to control or foresee the movement are important aspects (Bozic and Olsson 2013). I see these skills resonating with the ability to manage being in a state of not knowing. This leads me to argue that as dancers, we are taught to deal with changes and instabilities, and our profession as dance artists can ultimately become manageable since our dancing practice has already trained us to live and embrace its precariousness.

As Colin (2015) notes, dance is a 'constant state of flux', and, as Johnson (2005) argues, art prepares us to live more in tune with ever-changing nature. This made me wonder how the skills of dancing could be highlighted

and incorporated into life more broadly as a way to negotiate the instabilities of diverse varieties. If we learn to embrace fluctuations in life, we might be able to cope with instabilities better, and what I want to argue for is that dance improvisation is doing exactly that – embracing instabilities. Bozic and Olsson (2013) uphold the statement of dance improvisation being useful for embracing instabilities by proposing that business managers could better cope with the fast-changing environment that we face today by learning improvisational skills from artists (Bozic and Olsson 2013).

At Stockholm University of the Arts, I took part in a dance workshop with Caterina Mora,¹ which became an inspiration for my research. In the workshop, I was introduced to an exercise that I link to this way of looking at dance improvisation. Mora explored power structures in tango couple dancing, and as we were asked to dance with another person, she asked us to practice being invited to movement and inviting another, and as an individual, having the power to decide whether to accept the invitation. I saw this as a practice in staying present in the moment, without planning or predicting what movement will come next or trying to manipulate or have expectations of how the dance will be. To return to the notion of inconsistency and learning not to be disappointed when things unexpectedly change, this exercise offered by Mora can also teach dancers not to expect or control the unfolding of the dance.

A flowy dance quality

As part of my research, in the gatherings as well as in my teaching context, I offered an improvisation task inspired by Mora's workshop, in which I asked the students to dance two by two using physical touch. The intention was to focus on staying present in the moment and trying not to control where the movement would go. What I observed from the participants dancing was that they repeatedly fell into a habit of allowing themselves to be manipulated by the other, which made it obvious to me how well-trained dancers are in following the flow

of someone else's impulses or direction. This observation can be supported by my experience of teaching the exercise first to amateurs and then teaching the same exercise to people who had gone through dance training. The unfolding of the same exercise was significantly different; the amateur dancers moved with autonomy and allowed space for responding and taking decisions, whereas the trained dancers devoted themselves to the proposal of the other by immediately following. The trained dancers' developed awareness of responding to physical touch, from years of doing hands-on tasks and following the touch, keeping the flow and momentum going, made it clear to me that for a contemporary dancer today, this is an expected skill.

This observation made me reflect on the extent to which our ways of dancing, movement tendencies, and qualities have been co-created with the development of our current socio-political trends and norms. If I were to look at dance through the same lens as Quinlan (2017) and Brazzale (2014) and draw a connection between dancing and the sociopolitical climate, would the norms of our dancing, as I have observed in my study and described above, also be a result of the neoliberal world we live in? Is my flowy dance quality more a result of our contemporary socio-political times than just my 'natural tendency of moving'?

Promote or oppose?

I argue that dancers are, through improvisation, trained to stay present and to constantly shift and adapt, and are therefore prepared for a world subject to change. To cope with the instabilities of life, we can benefit from what dance improvisation offers; however, I am left with a dilemma. If I continue with my argument above – that dancers should work towards an even stronger flexibility to cope with the instabilities of life – one might also think of it as a 'giving in' to the precarious, and arguably difficult, lives that we are living. On the other hand, I criticise dancers' expectation to always be flexible and available; hence, the purpose of my research was to

challenge these trends. This leads me to question how far to go with my own manifestation of embracing the unknown, for which I am so devotedly arguing.

But at the same time, trying to counteract these flexible trends by aiming for the solid structure of traditional employment did not work out as a strategy. I have come to understand that holding onto structures or principles is not necessarily helping me feel stable. Rather, it makes one grasp onto 'things' as a coping strategy to avoid losing control. One can argue that life is unpredictable by nature, so it might not all be the fault of an economic system, but rather a question of acknowledging a world in constant transformation.

For now, I will continue to use the flexible dancer I am to embrace a precarious life, whether it is an adaptation to current liberal trends or an attempt to live in tune with the ever-changing world.

Endnote

1 Caterina Mora, Dance Workshop, Stockholm University of the Arts, 18 November 2021.

Bibliography

- Barad, K. 2014. "Diffracting Diffraction: Cutting Together–Apart." *Parallax* 20(3): 168–87, DOI: 10.1080/13534645.2014.927623
- Bozic, N. and B. Köping Olsson. 2013. "Culture for Radical Innovation: What Can Business Learn from Creative Processes of Contemporary Dancers?" *Organizational Aesthetics* 2(1): 59–83.
- Braidotti, R. 2013. "Nomadic Ethics." *Deleuze Studies* 7(3): 342–59. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/45331553>
- Brazzale, C. 2014. "(Un)covering Ground: Dance, Space and Mobility." *Theatre, Dance, and Performance Training* 5(2): 107–18.
- Colin, N. 2015. "Becoming Plural: The Distribution of the Self in Collaborative Performance Research." *Choreographic Practices* 6(2): 279–96.
- Deleuze, G. and F. Guattari. 1988. *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. London: Athlone Press.
- Johnson, M. 2005. "Embodied Knowing Through Art." In *The Routledge Companion to Research in the Arts*, edited by Michael Biggs and Henrik Karlsson, 141–51. London and New York: Routledge.
- Kolb, A. 2013. "Current Trends in Contemporary Choreography: A Political Critique." *Dance Research Journal* 45(3): 31–52.
- Quinlan, M. 2017. "Gaga as Metatechnique: Negotiating Choreography, Improvisation, and Technique in a Neoliberal Dance Market." *Dance Research Journal* 49(2): 26–43.
- Roche, J. 2018. "Dancing Strategies and Moving Identities." In *Contemporary Choreography: A Critical Reader*, edited by J. Butterworth and L. Wildschut, 150–64. London and New York: Routledge.
- Schmidt, C. U. 2018. "Infrastructural Performance: Reclaiming Social Relationality in Times of Structural Precarity." *Nordic Theatre Studies* 30(1): 5–19.
- Van Assche, A. 2017. "The Future of Dance and/as Work: Performing Precarity." *Research in Dance Education* 18(3): 237–51. DOI: 10.1080/14647893.2017.1387526

BIOGRAPHY

Clara Sjölin is a Swedish dance artist living in Leipzig, Germany. She works in the fields of choreography and pedagogy in various local contexts. Her recurring choreographic interests explore forms of social togetherness, liberation as a collective and individual manifestation, and the revival of historical events. The research pre-

sented in this article was part of Sjölin's final research for the MA programme in Dance Education (MADE) at Stockholm University of the Arts. clarasjoelin@gmail.com