On the Embedded Embodiment of Dancers in Language-based Site-specific Choreography

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ABSTRACT

This keynote presentation, held at the 16th Nordic Forum for Dance Research (NOFOD) conference, scrutinises how two cases of progressive forms of site-specific and language-based choreographic practices by performing dancers enact embedded embodiment. The addressed works of Paula Kramer (2021) and Kirsi Heimonen and Leena Rouhiainen (2022; 2024a) both entail motional exploration of chosen physical environments as well as their language-based articulation. The presentation introduces concrete examples from these works and discusses the site-specificity and language-use by the dancer-performers in dialogue with conceptions from embodied cognition and phenomenology. The examination of the notions of embedded embodiment or intercorporeality and the gestural base of language is the means through which the presentation suggests that there is a continuity between situated lived bodily experience and writing. The presentation likewise recommends that we consider language and linguistic expression integral to the medium of dance.

ABSTRAKTI

Tämä Nordic Forum for Dance Researchin (NOFOD) kuudennestatoista kansainvälisessä konferenssissa esitetty pääpuheenvuoro tarkastelee kahden progressiivisen paikkasidonnaisen koreografisen lähestymistavan ruumiillisia ja kielellisiä yhteyksiä. Paula Kramerin (2021) sekä Kirsi Heimosen ja Leena Rouhiaisen (2022; 2024a) teoksiin kuuluu sekä valittujen fyysisten ympäristöjen liikkeellinen tutkiminen että niiden kielellinen artikuloiminen. Puheenvuoro tarkastelee näitä teoksia konkreettisin esimerkein ja pohtii paikkasidonnaisuutta ja tanssijoiden kielenkäyttöä vuoropuhelussa ruumiillisen kognitiotieteen ja fenomenologian käsitteiden kanssa. Nojaamalla käsitykseen ruumiidenvälisyydestä ja ruumiiden situationaalisesta muovautuvuudesta se ehdottaa, että eletyn, kokemuksellisen ruumiillisuuden ja kirjoittamisen välillä on jatkuvuutta. Puheenvuoro kannustaa lukijaa ymmärtämään kieltä ja kielellistä ilmaisua olennaisena osana tanssia.

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Introduction

I am happy that the 16th Nordic Forum for Dance Research (NOFOD) conference, held on 23–26 April 2024 in Oslo, took as its focus *The Dancer and the Dance*. After all, in dance studies, the problem of the performing dancer has been focused on less than diverse issues and forms of choreography. This conference importantly added to the body of dance research that addresses the shifting embodiment, agency, and identity of dancers. The previous articulations in this area have reflected—in some cases only implicitly—the kinds of dance and dancing the addressed dancers were engaged in. They typically have also taken the individual dancer's perspective. For example, in relation to the lineage of Western modern and contemporary dance, in the 1970s and 1980s, there was a special interest in the kind of embodied experience dancing affords to dancers, and the moment of dancing was addressed as a form of thinking-in-movement (Sheets-Johnstone 1981). During this time, it was still typical that the different dance techniques of modern dance strongly marked the dancer's body. By the end of the 20th century, this situation shifted when contemporary dance's eclectic vocabularies required skilled dancers without rigid stylistic imprints on their bodies (Foster 1997). Since then, increasingly interdisciplinary genres of performance that combined technology, site-specific approaches, and interaction with different species have led to dancers being depicted to embody a moving identity that accumulated and altered through encounters with new choreographic patterns and frames (e.g. Roche 2015). Additionally, unfolding choreographic processes based on devising, scores, and other improvisatory means likewise underlined the artistic agency of dancers, their choices, and their actions as important contributions to the way performances materialise.

In this presentation, I will look into how a few progressive forms of language-based choreographic practices depend upon, orient, and highlight the embedded and even extended embodiment of performing dancers. My focus here is on site-specific practices that entail motional exploration of chosen physical environments, as well as their language-based articulation. In addressing this issue, I will introduce two concrete practical examples, explore embedded embodiment, and focus on related language use by dancer-performers in dialogue with insights from embodied cognition and phenomenology (cf. Kramer 2021; Heimonen and Rouhiainen 2022). My objective is to further understand the embodied agency of dancers in present-day contexts, where they engage in an extended field of practice.

Context and Concepts

Site Specificity

I will contextualise and position what I have to say throughout the presentation as I introduce my understanding of the concepts used herein and the site-specific performance cases I discuss. With site-specificity, I refer to dance and choreography that are practiced and performed in response to specific sites and places, that is, in non-theatre real-world locations. This genre of performance has a broad scope and varies in its aims, focus, and location; yet, in dance scholar Victoria Hunter's terms, it can be distinguished through its engagement with "everyday rural and urban environments" and "opportunities to explore space, place and environment through corporeal means" (Hunter 2015a, 2). Here, I will specifically focus on site-specific practices that utilise the "performers' sensory responses as means of developing" content for dance and choreography (Hunter 2015a, 16). In many cases, site-specific choreographic performance processes disrupt the known identities of the sites and can either celebrate or contest and contradict their habitual functions (Hunter 2015a, 1). Hunter (2015b) points out

that such site-specific processes have the "potential to both locate and re-locate the individual, drawing their attention to the site whilst simultaneously challenging pre-conceived notions of the site . . ." (Hunter 2015b, 459). Ethnographers Arijit Sen and Lisa Silverman (2014) suggest that to embody urban sites implies a process of becoming embodied and that the experience of place has a profound impact on the sense of our individual and collective selves and can situate us within larger contexts.

My interest here is how the embedded embodiment of performers of site-specific choreographic processes informs movement and language-based articulation. To address this, I will explore some aspects of the work by Paula Kramer, as expressed in her book Suomenlinna // Groupius: Two Contemplations on Body, Movement and Intermateriality (2021), in which she focuses on how movement and choreography emerge in collaboration with a specific site at Länsi-Mustasaari on Suomenlinna Fortress Island in front of the Helsinki downtown area. She visited and explored this site for 42 days between December 2016 and May 2019. These visits formed the basis on which she generated a workshop, a performance, texts, photographs, and video material. The second case that I will consider is the approach to textual choreography that I developed together with dance-artist and university researcher Kirsi Heimonen. Our approach involves a phenomenologically inspired score through which we physically explore urban sites through an attentive and motional approach and generate words with which we continue to produce collaborative texts that depict our embedded embodiment in the sites. At this point, we have employed this approach at five different sites, publishing both articles and a video of our work. Here, I mainly discuss the site of the Hakaniemi bank in Helsinki that we explored in 2021 (Rouhiainen and Heimonen 2021, 2024; Heimonen and Rouhiainen 2022, 2024a, 2024b).

Language-Based Artistic Practice

I borrow the expression "language-based" from the special interest group convening under the Society for Artistic Research. They promote what they call "language-based artistic research" and consider language within artistic research from a broad and transforming perspective. Their aim is to expand the idea of language-based practices to include diverse fields, such as the visual arts, performance, film, theatre, music, choreography, and literature, and thus move beyond writing, speaking, and listening (Language-Based Artistic Research Group n.d.). In addition to being interlinked with language-based artistic research, with its emphasis on dance performance, language, and textuality, this article also relates to the expanded field of choreography that—while being an indefinable notion—involves experimental and progressive choreographic work concerning both language-based and sociopolitically engaged practices. As we write together with Kirsi Heimonen, expanded choreography:

> . . . invites us to look at how else choreographers can approach choreography besides the known conventions of dance. It positions the choreographer as an investigator experimenting with diverse society related questions and problems from the perspective of movement and performance. The open-endedness of expanded choreography also entails that its medial specification is dependent on the problem posed or question explored by each specific work. (Rouhiainen and Heimonen 2024)

In the performance practice that I highlight herein, the performer and the choreographer amount to being the same person, and the practice can also be linked to what has been termed *textual choreography*. This is because the performance practices, at least as one of their aspects, utilise words and writing as means of conveying the experience of motionally embodying sites. In doing so, these practices have generated poetic texts that aim to evoke and even perform the embedded embodiment of the dancers at the site.

Textual choreography can be understood as focusing on the connotations of writing that the term choreography entails. In her book *Choreographing Empathy* (2011), dance historian Susan Foster shows that etymologically, the term "choreography" denotes things such as dance, rhythm, place, region, and the act of writing. As a performance-related practice, choreography indicates an elaborate correspondence between processes and places, as well as their translation into writing. Writing and text thus pertain to choreography, and this feature of choreography has been taken up in various ways by present-day choreographers. They have done this to the extent that dance scholars

Joellen A. Meglin and Lynn Matluck Brooks discuss textual choreography in the following manner:

> Different angles or vantage points come into focus, depending on whether the object of inquiry is a text inhabited and inscribed by bodies, or a dance/movement practice originating in or shaped by a text. By "embodied texts," we mean the choreographic manifestations of adapting literature – be it poetic, dramatic, or narrative in form – into the stylised movements of dance. By "textual choreographies," we refer to the innumerable ways in which literature has imagined the ontological fact of existing in a body. (Meglin and Brooks 2016, 2)

The manner in which Kramer (2021) and I and Heimonen (Rouhiainen and Heimonen 2021, 2024, Heimonen and Rouhiainen 2022, 2024a, 2024b) have utilised text in our expanded choreography, however, moves in the opposite direction. Our approach extends embodiment into verbal text. While both practices depended upon somewhat open performance scores, the explorative and motional site-specific practice engenders text instead for a text informing the manner in which movement performance is executed. It is specifically here that I am interested in further understanding embedded embodiment. By embeddedness, I refer to an understanding in which our actions, experiences, and knowledge are considered to evolve through a close and complex interplay between the body and the world. This interplay involves processes of adaptation to, co-regulation with, and entanglement with other people, materialities, and environments, as well as sociocultural meanings and conventions (e.g. Gallagher 2020). My more specific interest is in how embedded embodiment can be understood to extend into writing practices and how the text itself carries connotations of embodiment. In this respect, it is interesting what Foster has noted about choreography. For her, choreography is a form of theorisation "about what a body can be and do" and exposes how dance articulates "social, aesthetic and political values" (Foster 2011, 5). In short, she considers choreography to be about the practical theorisation of corporeal, individual, and social identity (Foster 2011, 4).

In her book, Kramer (2021) describes her intentions and practical process through at least four different ways, including descriptive accounts of the progression of her process and working towards a performance, diary entries on experiences of working at the site (in relation to seasonal changes and describing the score that evolved for the performance), poetic and evocative passages of experienced encounter, and related images. She does not explicitly address how the site-related texts she portrays in her book emerged. In contrast, Heimonen and I (e.g. Rouhiainen and Heimonen 2021; Heimonen and Rouhiainen 2022) describe the method through which we explore the sites we work at and how we experience the site to inform—and even generate—the words with which we continue to produce co-authored poetic texts. Our publications mostly involve the poetic textual choreography generated in relation to our chosen sites as well as more scholarly discussion about the premises and nature of our collaboration.

Here is an example of a diary entry by Kramer on her embodying the Suomenlinna site:

> I am with surface, with crust, with movement underneath. I sink into the rock, meeting its form as I come out with my elbow. I see, feel, hear, taste, smell, sense winter all around me, with its quietness and cold. (11.02.2018) (Kramer 2021, 40)

Another example from Kramer is a poem on encountering and working with a found buoy:

> **Meeting Buoy**
> Once upon a time
> you arrived on a beach
> by the sea
> rocks and pebbles all around.
>
> I pulled you up to meet with you
> and over time we became friends.
>
> Spending time together
> over the course of a year.
> Meeting and playing and testing
> and trying and dancing and
> resting.
>
> And we performed together
> on the surface of time.
>
> In the winter I let you rest –
>
> the world is still
> the grass is still
> the sea is ice.

Sometimes I move
and sometimes I am still also.

Will you be there next time I come?
(Kramer 2021, 53)

Here in turn is a short extract from the textual choreography produced by Heimonen and me on the basis of our exploration at the Hakaniemi bank in Helsinki during winter solstice on 21 December, 2021.

The spatial waters and skies pierce an urban landscape.
Edges, rigorously structured space.
Muddy deep water.
A challengingly cold breeze.
A loose stone paving.
A seagull swimming the bay.
The hubbub of roaring cars.
A circumscribed islet tightly guarded by streets, lanes, alleys, bridges and a highway.
Efficient function.
A junkie stooping on the shoreline, freezing.
Trees growing in boxes escaped into hibernation.
Moss and lichens deploying their tired
generosity. Passers-by proceeding in their ways.
Boatless and shipless docks echo the past.
Aversive melancholy.
Do not fall under. Will anybody be saved?
Rows of empty metallic benches. The Hakaniemi bank at some prior moment.
One pitiful boat returning from sea.
Suddenly, without warning, wet lime tree trunks in a row
slide under the breastbone.
The chilly dimness lacks breath, holds tightly.
(Heimonen and Rouhiainen 2022, 76)

Embedded embodiment and language

To respond to how we might understand the poetic texts above to deal with embedded embodiment and embodying place, I will shortly turn to a few phenomenological insights about embodiment and the bodily base of language. Here, I utilise the terms embedded embodiment and intercorporeality interchangeably to denote similar subject–body–world interdependencies. I do this to tentatively interlink embodied cognition and phenomenology for the purposes of this article. I understand intercorporeality to be a basic characteristic of our human embodiment. In promoting his view of carnal intersubjectivity or intercorporeality, phenomenologist Maurice Merleau-Ponty describes how we understand the gestures and acts of other people on a pre-intellectual level through the workings of the pre-personal body-subject (Merleau-Ponty 1995/1964). Merleau-Ponty describes the pre-personal body-subject as an anonymous or impersonal subject and even a natural self, pointing out that it operates and perceives even before a sense of a personal or reflective "I" emerges. He describes it as follows:

> Each time I experience a sensation I feel that it concerns not by own being, the one I am responsible for and for which I make decisions, but rather another self which has already sided with the world, which is already open to certain of its aspects and synchronized with them. (Merleau-Ponty 1995/1962, 216)

This dimension of our embodiment is in contact with and operates in relation to its surroundings prior to our personal intentions and, in many cases, direct awareness. It is here that the body, on an immediate level, responds to and accommodates its surroundings, involving human and more-than-human others, things, and places and their situational conditions. In Merleau-Ponty's (1995/1962) view, our understanding of other beings and objects is based on the nonconceptual affective, perceptive, and motional abilities of our bodies. Philosopher Scott Marratto argues that our individuality and ". . . relations with others are established first of all on the bases of our shared embodiment" (2020, 197). Indeed, Merleau-Ponty himself writes, "The constitution of others does not come after that of the body; others and my body are born together from the original ecstasy" (1995/1964, 174). The shared embodiment that Marratto points to can be understood as the basis of the ongoing regulation between our bodies and their surroundings, in which the body adapts to the latter, and we, through our body, project our practical interests and interpretations on our surroundings.

It is evident that the lived sense of place is likewise opened through our bodies' actions and movement. Our kinesthetic experience shows us that the world in

its lived sense is given to us as an if-then-structure. Our surroundings are part of the self-regulatory system of our bodies. According to phenomenologist Jaana Parviainen (2006), when we are in motional interaction with the world and adapt to it, we form bodily and kinesthetic forms of knowing. This is experiential knowledge about the whereabouts of objects and a tactile-kinetic understanding of the characteristics of the environment that trigger bodily sensations and opportunities for movement. In Merleau-Ponty's terms, "there is knowledge of place which is reducible to a sort of co-existence with place" (1995/1962, 105). The specific quality of any lived space is influenced by our previous experiences and our habits and skills, which partially determine how we move in and relate to our surroundings. However, our surroundings also involve culturally and historically determined material constituents. The lived body enlivens these by adapting to them and potentially reveals something new about them. We thus conceive of our surroundings against habitual and predetermined backgrounds in ways in which we can also be oriented towards an only imaginary and potential world (Merleau-Ponty 1995/1962; Heinämaa 1996).

Philosopher Shaun Gallagher underlines that in an intersubjective context specifically, ". . . interaction has an autonomy that goes beyond what the participating individuals bring to the process" (Gallagher 2020, 104). He continues to note the following:

> Attunement, loss of attunement, and re-established attunement maintain both differentiation and connection between individual agents. These processes result in the creation of meaning that goes beyond what each individual qua individual can bring to the process. In this regard, it is the interaction itself that contributes something that is not reducible to the actions of the individuals involved. (Gallagher 2020, 104)

These passages underline that it is our immediate perceptive and motional participation with others and our surroundings that generates significance and meaning. In interaction this occurs in ways that cannot be accomplished without the interplay of the involved agents. This, I assume, is the lure of immediate site-specific exploration.

Dancer and dance scholar Karen Barbour writes about the dialogic interaction with sites:

> Site-specific choreographers often utilize sensory awareness and somatic methods that support slowing down and paying attention, acclimatization and acculturation, participatory observation and mapping… These methods lead into improvisational responses and the development of movement material for choreography, and the choreography evolves in an ongoing dialogic process with the site. (Barbour 2019, 112)

In turn, Victoria Hunter describes the quality of site-specific choreographic processes:

> The site actively informs the form and content of the work in a manner unpredictable prior to the choreographer's engagement with the site . . . the choreographer effectively enters into a cyclical 'dialogue' with the site as each choreographic development presents an intervention within the site which in turn affects the practitioners' experience of the site, which then informs the following stage of the choreographic process. In this sense the choreographer's relationship with the site develops through a process of constant referral and co-existence through which the emerging work develops. (Hunter 2015c, 296)

In the case of Kramer's site-specific work, the manner in which she learned to know and communicate with the site at Suomenlinna Island emerged through repeated visitations and a slow observational process. As an example, she writes,

> I walk some 25 minutes to the site and once I have arrived roam around some more. At first I enter the site this way and that, moving here and there, testing, slowly becoming acquainted. The site is varied, where do I start today? (Kramer 2021, 41)

Kramer also writes about the site-related writing she engaged in:

> My initial diary entries are interspersed with notes from seminars, meetings, conferences, telling me

> later that I did not yet have a dedicated movement journal. With time, the work intensifies; from September 2017 onwards becoming much more concrete and gathering impact, vitality. (Kramer 2021, 42)

The first stages of my and Heimonen's method lay down the manner in which we go about exploring sites and producing words with which we later continue writing. Our score prompts us to do the following:

> 1. Explore the site by being attentive to how it resonates in and extends your body. Move in response to it. After spending some time at the site and sensing its impact, respond by writing down single words or two-word phrases in your notebook.
>
> 2. In the next few days, allowing the impact of the site to linger with you and using the words written at the site, write five to ten sentences, again conveying the sense of contact with the site. (Heimonen and Rouhiainen 2024a, 171)

What the above implies is that the work at the site by all three performers requires a form of attentive present-ness and time for exploration. Present-ness here refers to the manner in which performers are connected mainly to their immediate lived experience of the situation that attentive and receptive engagement with the site opens up (Hunter, 2015b). This, in turn, results in postural, gestural, and motional responses to attending to the environment. In the examples I discuss, aside from bodily actions and movements, the responses also involve words and writing. I have argued elsewhere that in becoming engaged with the lived moment of movement exploration, it is the motional stance of the body that forms the horizon through which the world is opened to the dancer. The motional stance forms the anchor through which other aspects of the exploration come into consciousness. Here, there is a flood of shifting sensations, feelings, imaginations, recollections, perceptions, and thoughts that are erased and replaced by each other as the motional stance continues (Rouhiainen 2003). The lived moment of motional exploration is thus not only about the experience of sensorimotor activity.

Shaun Gallagher writes about the bodily basis of language and refers to the communicative theory of gesture, in which gesture is considered "essentially language and functions primarily in communicative contexts" (2004, 118). He details gestures as expressive movements and speech—and, by extension, I would say some embodied forms of writing—that are activated in communicative situations and are not consciously thought of beforehand yet contribute to the accomplishment of thought. He argues that ". . . we do not have to be conscious of embodied functions for them to effectively accomplish thought. Gesture and language shape cognition in a prenoetic manner" (Gallagher, 2004, 123). He therefore opines that the emergence of language is profoundly dependent upon our preconceptual bodily interaction with others and our surroundings. From his perspective, pre-propositional first-order forms of language are movement, with the "movement of vocal cords, tongue, lips and hand gestures being the primary examples" (Gallagher, 2020, 156). As other aspects and forms of language are acquired, these first-order forms continue to be utilised, and Gallagher (2020) notes that language continues to process first-order interaction further into more sophisticated contexts. However, he underlines the following:

> To say that language accomplishes thought is not to say that there is first something inside one's head that then gets put out or expressed, but rather to say that the expression is the thought, and that language generates meaning. Through it we discover what we, and others, mean. (Gallagher 2020, 156)

Drawing on Merleau-Ponty's insights, Gallagher points to the fact that we are born into language. In Merleau-Ponty's thinking, language is what could be called a founded tradition, something that preexists in us humans and operates as a condition for all our behaviour. While it does not completely determine our being, it structures our perception and understanding, and we are never fully placed outside of language. Merleau-Ponty writes that language is "our element as water is the element of fishes" (Merleau-Ponty 1964, 17 as reported by Madison 1990/1981, 108; cf. Rouhiainen, 2024).

Additionally, it is important to note that while language depends on the body, language also transcends the body. Language is not accomplished without the motional body, but it is not reduced to

physical movement, either. The meaning generated in language is not "reducible to physical markers and movements that generate language" (Gallagher 2020, 156). Rather, language and its forms of expression bring with them an intersubjectively formed field of significances and denotations that impact the meaning that linguistic expressions convey. Interestingly, from a phenomenological perspective, this does not mean that "there exists only, language, but rather . . . that language is the mode of manifestation of being. Things other than language come to be in language" (Moran 2000, 282). This notion highlights that language appropriates things and gives them expression in order for them to be exposed as certain entities. Linguistic expression can support the unfolding and evolution of things into their fuller being. When considered in this way, there is a performative sense to language. While things find a place in language, in the best cases, they become articulated in ways in which their ownmost nature becomes recognised and allows them to become what they are in any given situation. Merleau-Ponty describes this as follows:

> It would then be found that the words, the vowels and phonemes are so many ways of "singing" the world, and that their function is to represent things not, as naïve onomatopoeic theory had it, by reason of objective resemblance, but because they extract, and literally express, their emotional essence. (Merleau-Ponty 1995/1962, 187)

These short notions about language emphasise that language is bodily based and fundamentally a gesture that expresses our practical and situational embeddedness. It originates from the same preconceptual motional contact we have with our life situations that other forms of site-specific movement expression originate from. In my work with Kirsi Heimonen, we were both struck by the experience of realising that we did not invent the words that we wrote down at the site in relation to our exploration. We felt that they were simply given to us, as if the site spoke through us (Heimonen and Rouhiainen 2024b). Here, the embedded interaction with the site generated something beyond what we could have done individually.

To end this presentation, I would like to argue against the previously held view in phenomenologically oriented dance studies, that posits that there is a sharp distinction between bodily experience and its verbal expression (e.g. Parviainen 1998). On the contrary, especially when writing is informed by a focal awareness of our situationally embedded embodiment and its lived spatiality, there is a continuity between bodily experience and verbal expression. It is true that words and writing borrow from the shared lexicon of language we are familiar with, but in the cases discussed herein, writing did so in ways in which the lived experience of the explored site impacted the use of language. As different forms of language-based and writing practices have become increasingly utilised by dancers and choreographers, Kramer's (2021) and Heimonen's and my own (e.g. Rouhiainen and Heimoinen 2024) approaches being only a few examples, I would like to argue that continued exploration of the interrelationship between embodiment, language, and writing in dance is called for. Could we not understand language through its gestural bodily basis and consider it a multimodal form of expression and communication whose sign systems include images, movements, music, and even objects and events, as well as words, sentences, and text (Kauppinen 2020)? I would also like to suggest that dancers continue to cultivate their embodied relationship with verbal language, words, and text—perhaps even coming to consider them as one of their expressive mediums that bear witness to bodily motion and interaction and articulate relational aesthetic, material, interspecies, social, and political values. Language and linguistic expression could thus be considered to belong to the medium of dance and its performance and to genuinely extend motional embodiment.

The keynote presentation at the NOFOD conference ended with a showing of the video *Writing the Shadows as Choreography* (Heimonen, Rouhiainen, Uunila and Nykyri 2021), which includes video clips of Heimonen and me exploring Tarja Halonen Park in Helsinki and a soundscape in which we read the textual choreography generated on the basis of this site.

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BIOGRAPHY

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