

Unlearning Dance: Reclaiming the Power of Dancing

Ieva Ginkevičiūtė and Indrė Gin

ABSTRACT

The Unlearning Dance: Reclaiming the Power of Dancing research workshops, led by artists and educators Agus Margiyanto, Ieva Ginkevičiūtė, Indrė Gin, and Retno Sulistyorini, explore the unlearning dance process. This ongoing collective research aims to reconsider institutionalised and commercialised narratives in dance across various contexts, as these narratives often restrict personal expression and marginalise diverse cultural and individual perspectives. Through workshops and collaborative inquiry, the authors explore entrenched habits in dance education in terms of the body, myths, and power dynamics. The research workshops draw attention to how participants reconnect with their embodied memories, discover movement habits, and reclaim dance as subjective and inclusive practice. Ultimately, this research expands the understanding of dance as an evolving, decentralised form of expression, with significant implications for both education and performance.

SAMMENDRAG

I workshopene "The Unlearning Dance: Reclaiming the Power of Dancing", ledet av kunstnere og pedagoger Agus Margiyanto, Ieva Ginkevičiūtė, Indrė Gin og Retno Sulistyorini, utforskes prosessen med å avlære dans. Dette pågående kollektive prosjektet har som mål å utfordre institusjonaliserte og kommersialiserte narrativer i dans på tvers av ulike kontekster, narrativer som ofte begrenser personlig uttrykk og marginaliserer mangfoldige kulturelle og individuelle perspektiver. Gjennom verksteder og samarbeidende undersøkelser utforsker forfatterne inngrodde vaner i danseutdanning når det gjelder kroppen, myter og maktdynamikk. I verkstedene rettes oppmerksomheten mot å gjenopprette forbindelsen med kroppslige minner, oppdage bevegelsesvaner og gjenvinne dans som en subjektiv og inkluderende praksis. Gjennom dette utforskende arbeidet utvides forståelsen av dans som en utviklende og desentralisert uttrykksform, noe som har en viktig betydning både for utdanning og scenisk dans.

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Introduction

In this practice-oriented article, we invite you to read about the ongoing collective research led by artist Indre Gin, educator Ieva Ginkevičiūtė, and dancers and choreographers Agus Margiyanto and Retno Sulistyorini. The Unlearning Dance research emerges as a natural response to the artists' needs after long dance careers. The artists aim to disconnect from existing dance practices and theories, reclaiming their subjectivity. Unlearning practice can lead to a certain knowledge and subsequently shape a theory. Reconstructing the narrative of learning dance helps open other possible ways of working with dance.

Our research inquiry now centres on how the knowledge stored in our bodies – learned movements – can be reconfigured, how dance can be liberated from institutional constraints, and how creativity can be reignited through spontaneous, embodied expression. To illustrate these ideas, we share insights from a collaborative workshop we facilitated at the 16th NOFOD Conference, *The Dancer and the Dance: Practices, Education, Communities, Traditions, and Histories*, held in Oslo in April 2024.

Conceptual Framework

“Dancers must hack their basic movement programs in order to adapt to new movements.”

—Steve Paxton (2018, 21), *Gravity*, Contredanse Edition.

The Unlearning Dance workshop involves more than just forgetting specific knowledge; it is about embracing the unknown and rediscovering our bodies' innate abilities to move creatively. This concept acknowledges that our understanding of dance is not only intellectual but also deeply embodied, shaping how we perform, think, and discuss movement. The Unlearning Dance workshop serves as an exploration of bodily memories, inviting

people to rethink learned dance and the embedded knowledge. Through this process, participants are encouraged to challenge their *know how* and dancing body habits to open up the questions of what we already know as a collective or individuals and what we do with the knowledge as such.

Imagine yourself in a dance workshop where the radio is on, there is no teacher, and you are left with only yourself, the music that you don't need to choose, and the questions surrounding you. What do you do? What begins to surface from your memory? What do you notice about the movements you're making? Why was this movement the first to emerge? And if you're sharing this space with others, how do you experience being together?

The first part of the Unlearning Dance workshop (research practice) begins with an experience that invites participants to reflect on their personal histories with dance, including their earliest memories. This scenario invites a process of self-reflection and exploration, encouraging them to tap into spontaneous movements, memories, and sensations that may be influenced by past training, experiences, or cultural contexts.

We note that we distance ourselves from any association with dance therapy or similar practices. Rather, our approach is to challenge the traditional structure and dynamic in which the main part of learning dance is dictated by the person in power – the one who *knows how to do it*. In this workshop, we decentralise and delete teachers' figures from the process; there is no teacher while you experience the Unlearning Dance workshop. In the space, there is only music (radio) and provoking questions on posters, with three main questions:

- What was dance to you when you were little?
- What is dance?
- What is dance now?



This design of the experience fosters personal discovery and renews the encounter with one's dance. Participants connect with both their past and present selves, cultivating an embodied understanding of dance within.

The second part of the Unlearning Dance workshop (research practice) focuses on collecting data from various participants across diverse contexts, reflecting the global nature of our collective, which spans different continents. We all focus on a couple of topics: the myths surrounding dance, the dance body, and the choreographic body. From this reflective exercise, valuable insights are produced regarding how these myths shape perceptions of who can dance, how dance should be performed, and the limitations placed on the body in choreographic practices. Participants in this process challenge their own notions, looking for a deeper understanding of the ways in which societal and institutional beliefs have influenced their own bodies and understandings about dance.

Through the Unlearning Dance workshop (research practices), participants with Western perspectives began to confront deeply embedded narratives about dance, such as the belief that only certain bodies are capable of dancing. By dismantling long-held myths – such as *dance has to be logical or only talented people can dance* – they reclaimed the freedom to move beyond societal pressures and performance expectations. Participants also engaged with the embodied memories connected to institutionalised dance training. By exploring alternative pathways to engage with dance, they were

able to identify ingrained habits and learning patterns. This process encouraged them to reflect more deeply on how to break free from these established norms and find new approaches to movement and self-expression.

In this context, unlearning dance became a way of confronting the legacy of institutionalised, commercialised, and centralised dance practices. As part of this research, we recently began collecting data in Java (Indonesia), where diverse cultural and social contexts have led to distinct ways of practising dance. This shift allowed us to highlight and give more visibility to decentralised forms of knowledge, acknowledging the value of local and community-based dance traditions that often remain overlooked in mainstream dance discourse.

Across the globe, so-called traditional dance institutions often preserve specific techniques and styles, creating a selective memory of movement that marginalises or erases others. The Unlearning Dance research explores the space for resisting these institutionalised memories of dance, challenging the dominant narratives and practices that have shaped dance education and performance. It seeks to open up possibilities for reimagining dance beyond the constraints of standardised techniques, fostering a more inclusive and diverse understanding of movement that acknowledges various cultural, historical, and individual experiences.

Several key insights have emerged, directly connected to the workshop activities so far:

- *Dismantling myths:* Many participants reflected on how the workshop helped them shed long-held beliefs.
- *Reclaiming freedom:* Numerous participants reported feeling liberated from the societal pressures and performance expectations that had previously limited their engagement with dance. As one participant noted, “I realised dance doesn’t need to follow strict rules or be logical; it can just be a natural extension of how I feel.”
- *Embodied memory:* Participants reflected on how their bodies had internalised specific dance forms that often felt restrictive or unfamiliar. These embodied memories were typically tied to past experiences in formal dance training and institutions.



Further Development of the Unlearning Dance Research

The Unlearning Dance collective research will delve more deeply into incorporating storytelling and video documentation methods, ultimately broadening its reach and exploring its transformative potential, always in a dialogic manner with matter. Collectively, we will deepen the theoretical and practical foundation and conduct further research about memories and dance, collaborating with experts in neuroscience, somatic practices, and embodied cognition to uncover how the body stores learned habits and how these habits can be disrupted.

Further questions to be explored include the following:

1. How does body memory change over time?
2. How does institutionalisation impact the evolution and expression of dance forms?
3. What role do personal and cultural narratives play in how dance is remembered and performed?
4. How can the process of decentralisation foster dance and other movement possibilities?

Insights from this research will inform further workshop design, allowing for other approaches to facilitating Unlearning Dance as a workshop. The Unlearning Dance research is a process of raising questions – whether simple or complex – and intentionally transforming and shaking ingrained dance habits. This practice involves resisting the urge to perform or meet specific standards, instead focusing on unlearning them. It is also about recognising the body's library of experiences and knowledge and reclaiming the power to express our subjectivity. We also see the dance as a reflection of itself. Through the ongoing development of the Unlearning Dance workshop, we aim to help participants reclaim

their dance and rethink their relationship with dance in society. By continuing to research, we hope to cultivate an environment in which movement is not confined to learned techniques but is an ever-evolving expression of the self.

BIOGRAPHIES

Agus Margiyanto is a professional dancer and choreographer and an alumnus of the Surakarta Art Institute. He is the founder of AR Movement Studio.

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Ieva Ginkevičiūtė is a dancer, educator, and researcher with an MAS in dance science and a bachelor's degree in dance pedagogy. She is also a member of the Performative Design Association.

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Choreographer **Indre Gin** is an independent artist and a member of the Performative Design Agency and the Arts Agency Artscape. Since 2016, she has been exploring domestic dance in different contexts and creating a range of works, including performances and visual art.

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Retno Sulistyorini is a professional dancer and choreographer, working with various artists and theatres in Indonesia and abroad. She is the founder of AR Movement Studio.

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