

Practising Composition: Making Practice. Texts, Dialogues and Documents 2011–2013

Authors: Kirsi Monni & Ric Allsopp (ed.; 2015): KINESIS 6 2015
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The publication *Practising Composition: Making Practice* results from—and documents—an Erasmus Intensive Project (IP) with that same title. Initiated and coordinated by Masters of Arts in Solo/Dance/Authorship (SODA) programme at the Inter-University Centre for Dance and the University of the Arts, Berlin, the project consisted of three 2-week long meetings among participating educational institutions during 2011–13.

Instead of reporting events in chronological order, the publication is organised into four sections related to sets of perspectives on the overarching subjects of the entire project: 'Poetics and [the] composition or dramaturgy'. The four sections are:

1. 'Poetics, ontology',
2. 'Form, open form',
3. 'Framing reality' and
4. 'Interruption, action'.

Overall, the book is a combination of keynote speeches, workshop documents and texts developed after one or several meetings. The editorial choice made by Kirsi Monni and Ric Allsopp to topically categorise and balance different forms of textual materials creates a good dynamic for reading as one can revisit topics and time periods without being presented with a linear report of the proceedings. Instead, one is dropped into an area of questions and interests related to the concerns of

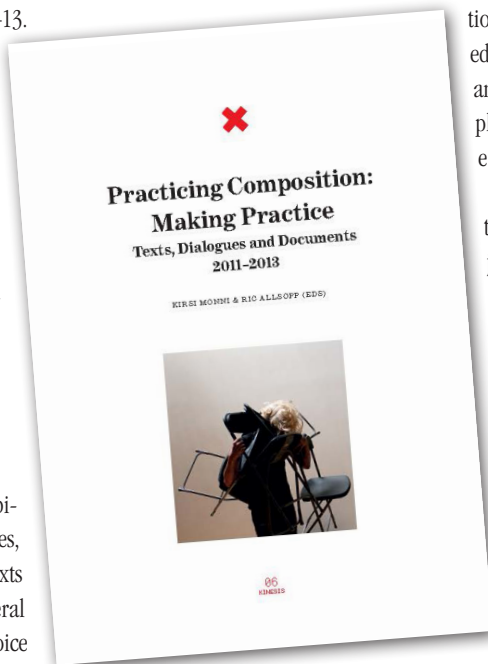
participants. Although the text in its entirety presents a large and diverse array of interests and perspectives, there are some questions that emerge as predominant:

What are the poetics in which the art field concerned engages and produces?

What is the current understanding of the terms 'composition', 'dramaturgy', 'practice' and 'production' within the expanded field of choreography, and how are these terms placed in relation to each other?

In the introduction, the initial objectives of the IP are stated as «(...) to identify and reflect innovative approaches to and assumptions about recent cross-disciplinary compositional tools (aesthetic, cultural, contextual) strategies within the field of contemporary

dance/body-based performance work». The publication was put together after the IP, so it has a different focus, a shift, which shows how the process itself is a re-articulation of a question instead of an answer to it. The focus of the publication is expressed as '(...) a question of contemporary (individual) poetics, of the ontology of work, composition, production,



product, process, performance, performer and performing'. We thus can see how the initial focus on 'compositional tools' unleashed an entire battery of crucial questions related to performing art's production. There seems to have been a real need to (re) open the discussion on composition.

From composing to practising composition

There are two particular items I would like to highlight as they reveal the publication's handling of the term 'composition' and effort to reshape its common understanding:

1. The absence of *composition* as a subject in any of the education programmes involved; and
2. The title *Practising Composition: Making Practice*.

That none of the education programmes specifically teach the subject composition reveals how practitioners in dance and choreography (or 'dance/body-based performance work', as stated in the objectives of the IP project, quoted here above) have come to distance themselves from the term and its understanding as an ordering of materials/components in time and space. In the conceptual development of Uniarts in Stockholm, there was a process of identifying the fields of research in which the institution would engage. I remember that the term 'composition' appeared as a subject and was rather strongly resisted by practitioners of choreography and dance (including myself). In the end, this field of research was entitled 'concept and composition', and André Lepecki, in his first seminar during a brief stint as a professor at Uniarts, mentioned that *composition* allows for a different understanding of production than *creation* does. *Practising Composition: Making Practice* engages in a similar effort to reclaim the term 'composition', however in quite a different way. Lepecki emphasised the ready-made aspect of materials where nothing is

created, but instead everything is composed, whereas this book underlines how the making of materials is always compositional. In a contribution, Emilie Gallier describes this concern in a straightforward way, noting that '[w]e usually think of composition as a final or late stage of the process. I have never been quite satisfied with that'. Instead of being understood as the finalising activity of ordering created materials, composition is put forward as a continuously present aspect within art production. Every choice in the process has an effect on the resulting material, and consequently, the agency of contextual matters is given recognition.

Although the different educational programmes involved are not specifically geared towards composition, they are drawn into it, and interestingly enough, the publication embraces the term in an affirmative way. It is refreshing to see the lack of resistance in the book. Two examples of this effort to engage with this term instead of resisting it are the dialogic contributions between Kirsi Monni and Victoria Perez Royo and between Sergiu Matis and Mila Pavićević. In the first example, Monni probes Perez Royo's resistance to the term 'composition', and together, they stretch its definition and applications in artistic work. In the latter, the dialogic format can be understood as a metaphor of the affirmative approach, as Matis and Pavićević start every enunciation by saying 'Yes and ...'. This agreement before addition might be an empty gesture as the following sentence could contradict the previous speaker/writer, turning the affirmation into a rhetorical trick. However, the attempt to not let oneself get caught up in polemics gives space for different perspectives to co-exist without becoming binary.

Now to the second particular: The title. To place the term 'practice'—which has had such constitutive power in the performance field over the past 5–10 years—in relation to the term 'composition' is a

performative act. The terminological questioning brought about by this write-act is a strong manifestation of one of the fundamental questions that has emerged at the intersection of academic research and artistic education (i.e. artistic research), namely, that of the relation process/product. The expansion of artistic research in European arts education surely is not the only cause of this emergence. In the book, we can find reference to not only Heidegger's dealing with the question of the artwork and Arendt's analysis of work and labour but also, continuing further up the line of Western philosophical tradition, the Greek philosophers and their dealings with *poesis*. Perhaps the expansion of the field of artistic research has contributed to placing the process/product problem back onto the agenda.

The two opening contributions by Luoto and Allsopp signal the field with which the book engages and provide the reader with a beautiful set of questions and filters through which to approach the rest of the book. Through the etymological analysis of Greek terminology, Luoto attempts to translate Heidegger's thinking concerning artwork into contemporary concerns about the subject. Allsopp proposes a vast picture of how we can understand poetics in contemporary choreography. This list arches between vague categories, such as 'fluid intersection' and 'experiencing experience', and extends to the brink of confusion but provides all the needed perspectives for a reader to move on through the different contributions.

Although not specifically addressed by any of the contributions, there is yet another current that feeds into the questioning of the artist's work within which the book places itself: The more recent questions of the artist's work within the paradigm of performativity and immaterial labour. In this way, the book situates itself within several of the most burning questions in contemporary performance

work, which, as we have seen, was also the goal of the project.

Unsecuring composition

In the initial keynote address, Luoto shows, citing Samuel Weber, how Heidegger translates, or translates, the Greek *poiesis* to the German *Entbergen*. *Entbergen* means revealing, but the combination of *bergen* (meaning harbour/conceal/rescue/recover) and *ent* (meaning forth/out) points to the movement of leaving a safe harbour. This term reveals the unsecure characteristic of *poiesis*. By showing the relatedness of creation and composition that *poiesis* achieves, the entire book becomes an attempt to unsecure the term 'composition'. Through a non-linear account and through diversity in 'text-texture', the publication reveals how the process of the IP project itself harboured compositional aspects that caused the published result. In that sense, the book walks its talk. Just like Goran Sergej Pristaš's contribution on the term 'post-hoc dramaturgy', the book stands as an example of how re-thinking the term 'composition' and its relation to meaning making can be a way to undermine the poor understanding of time as linear.

Rasmus Ölme.