

# Dansbaren – The Mob without Flash (2016)

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**D**ansbyrån, an artist-run platform initiated in 2003 for the development of contemporary dance and choreography as theory and practice, was active until 2016. Placing itself within a broader feedback tradition, *Dansbaren – The Mob without Flash* offers valuable insight into the development of dance practice in a Nordic context by taking a closer look at this development in Gothenburg, Sweden. The principal authors are Ingrid Cogne and Marika Hedemyr, supplemented by Moa Sahlin in addition to other contributing authors including Per Hengren, Lis Hellström Sveningsson and David Karlsson. Comprising altogether nine chapters and 214 pages, this publication offers a variety of perspectives on dance in addition to documenting the activities of Dansbyrån.

We have always had a utopian idea of the field ... and we tried to reach it by regularly providing a platform for articulation and contextualization. (Cogne and Hedemyr 2016, p.184)

Cogne, Hedemyr and Moa presented their publication at the 13th international Nordic Forum for Dance Research in Gothenburg in June 2017. This book was a highly relevant contribution with regards to the overall theme being democracy. Not only due to its questioning of informal power-relations in the field of dance production, but also through the form of their live presentation itself, by providing an open and inclusive dialogue and showing how to experiment with form.

The first chapter invites the reader to a presentation of the book's aim through a transcript



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Photos: Marika Hedemyr

of a dialogue, *in media res*, in which knowledge and its instability come into question. All that is ephemeral can go on existing perennially “as a spine”, according to Cogne, Hedemyr and Moa. An elegant metaphor both pointing to the core body-part but also in the pragmatic sense what holds a publication together. Also, *Dansbaren* as a Spine is a movement of reminding, thinking, and telling, but not claiming (p.177).

In the chapter called ‘The Talk of the Town’, Sveningsson draws a brief historical outline of the rise of the dance structures of Gothenburg from 1906 – 2016. Here, she presents the general development of a cultural policy for dance on a national and regional level, its many institutions, and the rise and formation of various new structures and innovative initiatives. Examples of how the state-led cultural policy of the 1990s pushed forward the first Swedish dance consultants on the regional level show the direct connection between those policies and the need for structural and budgetary “nurturing” in order for the Gothenburg dance practitioners to bloom. Amongst the various initiatives, we can follow how contemporary dance and its artist-led networks such as Rubicon Atalante and others not only have contributed to the field, but also to the establishment of the Gothenburg Dance and Theatre Festival. From this perspective the book also serves as a form of documentation of the regional development of dance in Sweden.

The book – publication, and manual is equipped with a physical tool: an orange-and-grey foldable tablecloth with a graphical design similar to that of a game board. A “sort of matrix of information that could re-activate and support our conversation” (p.13). Because it has no apparent order or instruction manual on where to begin, it opens up further creative possibilities, such as even possibly making up one’s own. Clearly, the foldable tablecloth invites “laying the table” for discussions, in order to provoke conversations, with the suggestive keywords Platform, Articulation, Work, Knowledge, Power, and Time along its edges. In addition, seven text-circles with headings attract attention depending on which side of the tablecloth one is sitting on. The phrases, graphic symbols and keywords intend to enable and select perspectives for a discussion to emerge. The headings are “Rush Hour Knowledge”, “Power and Aesthetics”, “Movement of Knowledge - Movement in Knowledge”, “Någonism – Someone-ism”, “our Knowledge, Power and Aesthetics, Dance and choreog Hour Hou mmm” “The Practice of Dialogue”, “Is Making Art First a Method?” and “Dance and Choreography – Education Beyond Clichés”, all of which can be chosen as a possible opening for a conversation. The advantage of using this discussion device is that it may possibly help facilitate dynamic exchange and advance discussions further, although it requires a well-prepared host to lead the discussion.

Introductions to the chapters (with an editor’s note) support and contextualize the aim of the selected material, which makes the different parts of the book easy accessible. According to Cogne and Hedemyr, the intertwinement of creation and self-organisation within what is called “powerless structures” may also nurture hegemonic views within dance creation, thereby limiting the discourse. This may be a relevant point, considering that the majority of the work-force is made up of women. Their underlying critique of self-organization and its

perils has roots in feminist movements, with reference to Jo Freeman's "The Tyranny of Structurelessness". Following their argument, the recipe is to *cultivate* a feedback culture, creating democratic practices and the inclusion of diverse viewpoints, as well as offering a challenge to self-appointed elites.

Like a similar Norwegian initiative called Seminarium<sup>1</sup>, *Dansbaren* can also be seen as a further development of the critical response process of Liz Lerman.<sup>2</sup> *Dansbaren* is an interesting book in its use of a dialogue format, opening up for further articulations, feedback and generating further discourse. "Through practical experimentation we have created concrete situations where we have tried approaches, methods and tools for feedback" (p.137). By building upon their experiences during Dansbyrå, Cogne and Hedemyr offer the reader a point of reference which also serves as a documentation of Nordic contemporary dance. They also wish to re-activate and re-articulate material from years of critical-oriented activity, mixing old things and new thoughts (p.44).

As a publication with relevance to dance as an art-form, corporeality and self-organization, the manual offers a valuable opportunity to reflect upon the role of language, rhetoric and critical discourse in art. The manual is well worth reading for dance practitioners as well as scholars, pedagogues and institutions with an interest in audience development. Dance and theatre critics, as well as cultural administrators and policy-makers may also acquire a greater understanding of the developing contemporary-dance field. Finally, an interesting documentation of an ongoing critical practice that may urge and inspire others to do expand their scope in creating further possible feedback-situations.

## References

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## Endnotes

1 Roar and Pape 2014.

2 Lerman 2018.