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Considering the Ontological Premises for Tools in Artists' Education–on Poiesis and Composition

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ABSTRACT

This article considers the ontological premises for tools in artists' education, specifically in choreography studies at the master-of-arts level. The topic has proven to be crucial in planning and executing a curriculum of study in the contemporary age of pluralistic aesthetic intentions as any tool, as habitually understood, is ready-to-use according to its disclosed purpose and thus has, in a way, already solved some aspects of the singular research question posed between the artist and the prevailing world. The topic of tools turns out to be a wider question of contemporary poetics (techniques, methods, knowledge) and of ontological considerations of the nature of poiesis and artwork.

The topic of contemporary poetics was extensively discussed in a 2011-2013 Erasmus Intensive project, which was an educational collaboration among six European master's programmes in dance and physically based performance in which the writer took part. This article reports some aspects of that discussion and elaborates on a traditionally widely used concept in choreography education–namely, composition. The article tackles the complex issue of poetics and tools by, firstly, discussing poiesis and the *causes* to which artwork is indebted and, secondly, by searching in some ontological premises for the notion of composition. The article presents a view of composition derived from Martin Heidegger's elaborations of *logos*: Logos is letting something be seen in its togetherness with something–letting it be seen as something. (Heidegger 1962, 56). Following this notion, I propose a view to composition as a certain *togetherness in relatedness* in which case the concept of composition might serve both as reflective knowledge of construction and as a deep research question in artists' creative processes.

TIIVISTELMÄ

Artikkeli käsittelee 'työkalujen' ongelmallisuutta taiteilijan koulutuksessa, erityisesti MA tason koreografian opetuksessa. Aihe on osoittautunut oleellisen tärkeäksi moninaisten ja heterogeenisten esteettisten tavoitteiden nykyajassa, sillä jokainen työkalu, kuten se konventionaalisesti ymmärretään, on käyttövalmis jo aiemmin varmistetun päämäärän ja metodin mukaan, ja siten se on jo osittain ratkaissut yksittäisen ja erityisen taiteellisen kysymyksen taiteilijan ja maailman välillä. Kysymys 'työkaluista' taiteellisessa prosessissa näyttäytyy minulle laajempana poetiikan (tekniikoiden, menetelmien, tiedon) kysymyksensä sekä *poiesiksen* ja taideteoksen ontologiaan liittyvänä kysymyksensä.

Poetiikan teemaa käsiteltiin laajasti kuuden eurooppalaisen esittävän taiteen MA ohjelman Erasmus Intensive -projektissa vuosina 2011-2013. Tämä artikkeli raportoi joitain aspekteja tuosta keskustelusta ja kehittelee edelleen koreografian opetuksessa perinteisesti keskeisen *komposition* käsitteen analyysia. Voidakseni käsitellä poetiikan, työkalujen ja taideteoksen kompleksista suhdetta, pohdin ensin teoksen luomisen kysymystä *poiesis* käsitteen avulla ja sen jälkeen komposition ontologiaa erityisesti Martin Heideggerin *logos* käsitteen avulla. Esitän ajatuksen kompositiosta '*yhteenkuuluvuus suhteisuudessa*' -tapahtumana ja että tällaista näkymää vasten komposition käsite voisi palvella taiteilijan, erityisesti koreografin, koulutuksessa sekä rakenteellisena reflektiona että syvällisenä taiteellisena tutkimuskysymyksenä.

Considering the Ontological Premises for Tools in Artists' Education–on Poiesis and Composition

Kirsi Monni

Introduction

This article considers the ontological premises for tools in artists' education, specifically in choreography studies at the master-of-arts (MA) level. The topic has proven to be crucial in planning and executing a curriculum of study in the contemporary age of pluralistic aesthetic intentions as any tool, as habitually understood, is ready-to-use according to its disclosed purpose and thus has, in a way, already solved some aspects of the singular research question posed between the artist and the prevailing world. The topic of tools turns out to be a wider question of contemporary poetics (techniques, methods, knowledge) and of ontological considerations of the nature of poiesis and artwork.

The topic of contemporary poetics was extensively discussed in an Erasmus Intensive project, which was a 2011–2013 educational collaboration among six European master's programmes in dance and physically based performance in which the writer participated with MA choreography students. The project was initiated by the Masters of Arts in Solo/Dance/Authorship programme at the Inter-University Centre for Dance, University of the Arts, Berlin. This article reports some aspects of that discussion and further elaborates on a traditionally widely used tool in choreography education–namely, the concept of composition.

To tackle this complex issue of poetics and tools, particularly composition, in artists' education, I firstly think about poiesis and the causes to which the artwork is indebted and, secondly, search in some ontological premises for the notion of composition. I present a view of composition derived from Martin Heidegger's elaborations of logos: Logos is letting something be seen it its togetherness with something –letting it been seen as something. (Heidegger 1962, 56). Following this notion, I propose a view to composition as a certain togetherness in relatedness in which case the concept of composition might serve both as reflective knowledge of construction and as a deep research question in artists' creative processes.

My approach is that of a dance artist whose research interests have long lain in ontological artistic issues; my expertise is not in art pedagogical discourse. In my doctorate on artistic research (Monni: 2004), I analyse the paradigmatic changes in dance ontology during the 20th century. I am especially concerned with elaborating the turn from modernistic aesthetics to postmodern approaches, which I define as linked to the larger phenomena of the critique of metaphysical ideals and the turn to post-metaphysical being-in-the-world. Hence arises my interest in the thinking of Heidegger, his fundamental ontology and the philosophy of art, which also inform this article. In several writings, Heidegger profoundly discusses the different aspects of poiesis, production and creation and the relationship between techne as knowledge and artwork (e.g. Heidegger 1935/36, 1999, 1977). I can touch on these issues only very briefly in this article. My main concern here is to spark discussion of the theme of tools in artists' education and to specifically address one topic: The concept of composition.

Tools, knowledge and individual poetics

The dilemma of tools in artists' education is crucial in our times of pluralistic aesthetic intentions and goals as a tool, as mentioned, is habitually understood as ready-to-use according to its disclosed purpose. Thus, it has, in a way, already solved some of the singular artistic-research questions posed between the artist and the world. Teaching tools, as normative formulas, might lead to proceduralism if the singular creative process becomes institutionalised, the habitual or conventional modelling that the tool suggests overrides the specific artistic research question or theoretical representation overwhelms actual perception and fresh interpretation.

However, we cannot *make or create* anything without being informed by different conceptualisations, various modes of knowledge and the use of certain methodologies in the already-opened historical world. Therefore, the idea of tools in artists' education concerns a wider question of individual poetics which is intertwined with historical and cultural contexts and incorporates various methodologies, knowledge, skills, techniques, insights and personal ethos. My concern is directed at the use of such methodological and ideological tools and techniques that take the position of prescriptive directives, replacing the specific artistic research question. This trend happens easily in educational situations and under the pressures of the predictability in production in the art world. My question is how to search for educational knowledge and know-how and to keep the artistic research and creative process open and truly inventive. I attempt to approach a few aspects of this complex issue from historical and ontological perspectives.

Poiesis–Poetics–Production

I start by thinking of what actually happens in the creative process, in the birth of something new, something which was not there before. First, there has to be potentiality and a favourable situation for creation and production to happen, the potentiality for a plant to grow, cat to be born, car to be made and work of art to be created. In ancient Greek philosophy, this manifestation of being from non-being is called poiesis. How do I understand the term 'poiesis' today? What can it offer regarding our issue? I turn to Finnish philosopher Miika Luoto who discusses the terms 'poiesis', 'poetics', 'praxis', 'action' and 'production' in connection to contemporary poetics. In explaining the term 'poiesis', he starts with the Plato's statement that ''any *cause* that brings into existence something that was not there before' is poiesis. This means simply that there is poiesis every time something comes from non-being to being. Every art (*techne*, that is, know-how, skill, technique) is *poietic,* whether it is the art of the craftsman producing the utensil or the art of the artist producing the work' (Luoto 2015, 37).

I am especially interested in Plato's statement about the notion of cause: 'Any cause that brings into existence something that was not there before' is poiesis. What is cause? How should it be understood in this statement? Luoto elaborates this by following the interpretation proposed by Heidegger in his reading of Aristotle. To be understood, the notion of cause has to be freed from the modern idea of causality. According to Heidegger, the Greek word for cause, *aition*, means that to which something else is indebted or that which is responsible for something else (Luoto 2015, 43; Heidegger 1977, 7). Heidegger takes his example from the sphere of handicraft: A silver chalice. Following Aristotle he finds four causes to which the chalice is indebted: The *matter* of silver, the preconceived *form* of a chalice and the particular end, or *telos*, of the sacrificial vessel, which are all gathered together under the fourth cause: The craftsman's careful consideration. Causes then '*allow* something to *show itself* and so to be present

as something' (Luoto 2015, 44; Heidegger 1977, 6-8).

If we follow this line of thought, what makes an ordinary utensil or commodity, say a teacup, differ from artwork? Could this answer be thought of from the point of view of these motivating causes? If the questioning of the motivating causes has *come to its end* with the commodity (the teacup is manufactured from a suitable material by a capable manufacturer and formed to fulfil its intended purpose: The drinking of hot tea), the interplay of the motivating causes in *artwork* lies in the full investigation of the creative process. Here, I see, is the fine line between the tool (technique, knowledge, methodology) being not an instrument for commodity production, in the sense described but knowledge that opens potentialities and possibilities for creative work, research and reflection.

What may often happen in everyday educational practices is that the underlying ideologies, intentions or conventions of which each artistic tool is composed stay concealed or are only partially investigated. Therefore arises the need to try to disclose and keep open the intentions and causes to which each tool is indebted. If the four causes–matter, form, function and the considerations and actions of the maker–are all under intensive investigation in the creative artistic process, then why not approach the tools (techniques, knowledge) with the same questions? How are the tools composed, created or produced in terms of motivating and forming causes?

Composition

I would now like to discuss one artistic tool–composition–which historically has been used frequently as a module in dance curricula. However, as Victoria Perez Royo states within the Erasmus Intensive discussions, the titles of many modules which used to be called 'Composition' have been changed to new terms, such as 'Research methodologies' or 'Introduction to problems of research', at least on the MA level of choreography education in the European context. These changes are intended to avoid the 'danger of proceduralism or narrow understanding of composition as an application of ready-made procedures without any deep questioning of their pertinence in relation to the research processes' (Perez-Royo 2015, 91). When used as prescriptive formulas, the preconceived ideas of a dance composition can be applied by students even before they have identified an interesting research question or attractive problem to inhabit. In this narrow sense, composition can be an activity that hinders genuine questioning of the research materials, leading, without major resistance, to the fabrication of an artistic product (Perez-Royo 2015, 91).

How to avoid this problem? How to unravel and move the habitual understanding of composition, to open or think anew its premises? Or should we reject the term 'composition' and the accompanying terminology altogether and find new, more accurate ones? So far, I have been insistent on keeping the term. My main reason is that I cannot see how composition, in relation to poiesis, in relation to *any* production, can be avoided.

As understood in common language, the term 'composition' signifies the manner in which a thing is com-posed, put together, connected, arranged. It embodies the idea of a set of elements which, connected together, form a whole, showing properties which are properties of the whole, not of the component parts. Overall, this description is valid for all kinds of compositions, be they composed objects or dynamic systems. Therefore, I see that it is not the pure fact of composition but, rather, the manner of how something is composed and what is actually composed in terms of the causes, including material and contextual ones, that undergo constant evolution and investigation. Differently composed is still composed.

How then to think further with composition? To

what does it refer? What does it disclose as bringing something from non-being into being, as poiesis? Here, I want to raise what Heidegger says about *logos* in *Being and Time*: '*Logos* is letting-something-be-seen-in-its-togetherness-with-something–letting it be seen *as* something' (Heidegger 1962, 56). This formulation comes quite near to Plato's statement on poiesis. For Plato, even nature is *poietic* insofar as it spontaneously allows something to become manifest. When Heidegger speaks about *logos*, he also refers to *both nature's* ability to bring forth *and* to human language and knowledge (*techne*). In both cases, a certain *togetherness in relatedness* shines through in all manifestations, in all compositions. I see composition as an *event* which happens in this act of manifested relatedness. As well, I see it as the potentiality to search and research within all possible relatednesses to bring forth new ones.

How then to approach composition as togetherness-in-relatedness from the perspective of poetics (knowledge, tools, techniques) and of causes? I see that, in every composition, there is a certain relatedness of the causes to which the composition is indebted. According to the singular artistic research process, each cause and its specific relatedness is scrutinised, whether intuitively, consciously, systematically or by chance procedures. What interests me here is that sheer knowledge of the ontology of *causes* and their *relatedness* might free the creative process from a habitual understanding of the constructional elements of composition. I especially like the position of the composing subject, the artist, as the *fourth* cause–not the first–as it recalls the necessity to ponder the material's own expressivity, meaning the material's own *togetherness-in-relatedness*, its own *logos*. This view also frees one's mind to openly think of the work's *telos*, the *end* (the compositional whole, the gestalt of the work) according to each specific artistic question. In the *interplay* of the four causes, it becomes evident that the act of poiesis, the creation of the work, is not about and of the artist but of the world which speaks through the creative process of the artist. How the artist perceives the potentialities and materialities of reality and their relatedness informs all phases of the composition process. But it is the matter not only of the perceiving subject but also of how the *world* speaks to us in the composition process, how the world dispossesses and exposes us to what needs to be thought of and what calls to be composed anew.

Constructional elements of composition and togetherness-in-relatedness

When one so approaches poiesis and composition, these kinds of ontological considerations are not handy tools or techniques which are quickly delivered, adopted and ready-to-use. They are ideas, thoughts and practises meant to support students in developing their individual poetics and the ability to identify and inhabit interesting artistic problems and research. But do these considerations help students in practice, in the actual process of making and producing? I say yes, precisely in how they demand wider reflection on the *how* and *what* of what is being composed. However, I admit that, to propose a solid educational approach, I would still bring forth reflection and discussion on the basic *constructional elements* of composition as compositional knowledge to accompany the idea of the interplay of the causes in a creative process.

By the constructional elements of composition, I mean such concepts as motive, repetition, variation, contrast, proportion, balance and transition. As I see it, these constructional elements are originally abstractions from the way our consciousness recognises and organises our everyday being-in-the-world. I mean that everyday life emerges as perceived and recognised motives (targets of attention, identified

things), patterns (collections of things, temporal and spatial structures), repetitions, variations, contrasts and transitions. We understand when and how a transition from one thing to another happens; we perceive and recognise a change and a difference. I see that most of these basic constructional elements exist in all possible compositions but in various proportions within different parameters, depending on each object of study and each process of creation, each poiesis as the interplay of the causes.

But in my opinion, I must emphasise that the relevance of these constructional elements in how or if they inform the composition depends on careful consideration of their function in each case. I believe that they are not necessarily linked to any aesthetic genre, style or ideology per se, but the consideration of their function and identity in each case points to the necessity to think about the causes to which the composition is indebted. In the example of the silver chalice, the causes are *matter*, *form, telos* and the considerations of the *artist*. In the choreographic process, the pondering of the causes might start with questioning what the matter or materiality of this choreographic composition might be. What could it be? What do the materials express as their own logos, their own relatedness? What kind of relatedness do they propose in the context of the research question?

In conclusion of this article, I present a few words about the evolution of contemporary notions of choreographic composition. As widely known, the fluxus event scores from the 1960s initiated a shift from '*pre-conditioned object*' (Cage's term) to choreographed composition as a latent 'framework within which something can take place, a transaction can be affected' (Allsopp 2015, 129-130). Since then, the evolution of the 'choreographic image' has expanded the notion of choreography to encompass the idea of the movement of materials toward indeterminate and open forms that manifest latency and reflect changes in wider political, social and cultural attitudes, as Ric Allsopp accurately describes (2015,140, 148–152). When composition is understood not as an instrumentalising material practice but as 'distributive, open and generative agency', it remains a composition with a certain relatedness, proportion, balance and variation of materials which express the interplay of the causes to which the composition is indebted.

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BIOGRAPHY

Kirsi Monni is Doctor of Arts (dance) and professor of choreography at the Theatre Academy of the University of the Arts, Helsinki. Kirsi Monni has worked extensively in the field of dance and pedagogy since the 1980s. Her research interests are dance ontology and the theory of performance. She is a founder and served as a developer and co-director of the Zodiak–Centre for New Dance before accepting the professorship in 2009. She has received numerous grants and a national award for her choreographic work.

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