



Choreographic Principles in ‘Affective Choreographies’

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Abstract

This article is based on my PhD project in artistic research, *Affective Choreographies* (2019), and the aim is to share this with focus on central research themes, research questions and choreographic principles developed within the practise. I will lay out two directions within affect theory; Brian Massumi’s theory of affect and Silvan Tomkins’ psychobiology of differential affects. The central research question is “How can particular choreographic principles employed in the performances create potentiality for affect to occur *amongst the audience*?” Two perspectives are important to how these questions were approached; the audience as receivers of the performances where the questions were put into practise, and the idea of potentiality as something which can and cannot be actualized. The six performances created during the research period all took shape as what I have called *choreography as assemblage*. The choreographic assemblages contain both human and non-human movement which carry the potential for kinaesthetic transference.

Situated in choreographic assemblages and using kinaesthetic transference as a tool, three main choreographic principles were developed and employed through my research: *minimal composition: slowness and repetition, multi-referencing* and

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performer as matter. A particular focus is the affective potentiality within each choreographic principle and how these principles operate both within the realm of Massumian affect as well as within Tomkins School affect. This implies a blurring of the division between the two or working them simultaneously, something which might be a theoretical impossibility but still, I claim, possible in practise.

Keywords: choreography, artistic research, affect, choreographic principles, audience

Introduction

This article is based on the outcome of my artistic research PhD project *Affective Choreographies* (2012/2019) at the Oslo Academy of the Arts. Artistic practice is at the core of this programme, and the artistic work is accompanied by an explicit reflection which grants others access to methods and insights that emerged from the research. *Affective Choreographies* resulted in six performances²: *HOODS* (2014)³, *Cosmic Body* (2015), *Shadows of Tomorrow* (2016), *STATE* (2016)⁴, *Diorama* (2017) and *Deep Field* (2018), as well as the publication *Affective Choreographies* (2018).

The background for the research was a belief in art as a vehicle for change through taking the role as 'utterly useless' in a society where most other things have a given and known purpose. When confronted with something that does not perform as expected or that resists classification, it is necessary to look for new approaches, and in these moments of liminality lies the potentiality (Agamben & Heller-Roazen, 1999; Harman, 2009) for the unpredictable and unforeseen to emerge.

In this article, I will lay out the theoretical perspectives that have informed my research and discuss how they inform a key choreographic concept: Choreography as assemblage. I will further unpack the research questions and artistic research method where I aim to show how theory and practice are intertwined in the project. Lastly, I will demonstrate how this approach manifests as choreographic principles in the artistic work and discuss how these respond to the research questions through creating potentiality for affect to occur.

² For full credit lists of all performances, see www.ingrifiksdal.com

³ Created in collaboration with scenographer Signe Becker.

⁴ Created in collaboration with director Jonas Corell Petersen.

Theoretical perspectives

There are two main directions within affect theory, one where philosopher Brian Massumi, whose approach stems from the philosophical lineage of Spinoza-Deleuze (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010), sees affect as 'a prepersonal intensity corresponding to the passage from one experiential state of the body to another and implying an augmentation or diminution in that body's capacity to act' (Massumi, 2000, xvi). Compared to feelings and emotions, which according to Massumi are seen respectively as personal and social, affects are more abstract since they are prior to or outside of human consciousness and cannot fully be realised through language. Affects are the body's way of preparing for action in a given context by adding a quantitative dimension of intensity to the quality of an experience. The body has its own grammar, which cannot be fully grasped by language because it experiences on a different level of meaning (Shouse, 2005).

The other main direction within affect theory is known as the Silvan Tomkins' psychobiology of differential affects (Gregg & Seigworth, 2010, 6). A central discussion between the two directions of affect theory is whether it makes sense to separate affects from feelings and emotions. While Massumi's interest in affect lies in its autonomy from language and culture, the Tomkins school sees a larger value of affect when being discursive and hence not separated from feelings and emotions. Within gender studies, queer and postcolonial theory, autonomous affect has no use value, as it does not take into consideration how privilege, gender, race and sexuality create difference in society (Fredriksen, 2012, 7). My own approach to affect includes both of the above-mentioned perspectives. When discussing the choreographic principles in the second half of this text, I will argue for how I dealt with the tension between the two perspectives, and how it was possible to combine them in the choreographic work.

Alongside Massumi and Tomkins, the most central sources in this research were Jane Bennet's *vital materiality* (Bennett, 2010) and choreographer Mette Ingvarsten's Artificial Nature series (Ingvarsten, 2016) including both the choreographic and the written work. Bennet claims that humans, especially adults, often separate the world into matter (it, things) and vibrant life (us, beings), which hinders us from recognising the vitality of matter, the capacity of things. She draws on a Spinozist notion of affect, which refers broadly to the capacity of *any body* for activity and responsiveness. Impersonal affect or material vibrancy is not a separate 'life force' animating the matter said to house it. Instead, affect is equated with and inherent in materiality

(Bennett, 2010, vii-2). 'Materiality is as much force as entity, as much energy as matter, as much intensity as extension' (Bennett, 2010, 20). In this research, this allows me to discuss affect as something which can take place between both human and non-human bodies, from non-human to human and vice versa. Ingvarsten has worked extensively with choreographies of non-humans and the agency of things, both with and without human performers present (Ingvarsten, 2016). Ingvarsten writes about the performance *The Artificial Nature Project* that '[t]he performativity of this piece is neither in the humans nor in the materials alone, but in the intersection between them' (Ingvarsten, 2016, 3). The way in which Bennet and Ingvarsten consider the agency of non-human actors in their work has influenced the development of a central choreographic concept of this research: choreography as assemblage.

Choreography as assemblage

To approach choreography as an assemblage runs through all six productions in this research. This concept is presented as a part of the introduction because it informs the understanding of the research questions as well as the choreographic principles of this work, which are discussed in the following chapters.

An assemblage, following Deleuze and Guattari (also referenced in Bennet (2010) and Ingvarsten (2016)), is an ad-hoc grouping of beings of all sorts, where humans are included as beings among other beings (Deleuze & Guattari, 2000).

Assemblages have uneven topographies because some crossing points of the various bodies and affects are more heavily trafficked than others. This implies that power is not distributed equally across the surface of the assemblage (Bennett, 2010). I see this as a parallel to how a performance would dramaturgically move between a part 'heavily trafficked' by sound to a part where the movement seems to dominate whilst still being a total system of interaction between *beings*.

The performances in this research are created and structured in such a way that the light design, sound, dance, movement, costume, scenography, performers, props, audience, audience set-up and site are equally important, although weighted differently from one piece to another.⁵ I never use the auditorium of the theatre

⁵ This type of composition and dramaturgy relates to approaches in what Hans-Thies Lehman would call post-dramatic theatre, or in a Norwegian context, Knut Ove Arntzen's 'likestilt dramaturgi'.

space, but instead put the audience (seating) on stage. The audience is within metres of the performers, enveloped in light, sound and scenography. I attempt to create choreographies *of all elements* within my work. This implies that the movement of a sound wave is as much part of the choreographic as the movement on an arm.

In *Diorama* (a site-specific work often performed by the seaside), the co-existence of performers, costumes, rocks, snow, seagulls, waves, boats, sunlight, speakers, beach and wind is what constitutes the choreographic assemblage. This suggests that the potential for affect in the choreographic becomes 'distributed across an ontologically heterogeneous field, rather than being a capacity localized in a human body or in a collective produced (only) by human efforts.' (Bennett, 2010, 23) Hence, the potentiality for affect lies with all vibrant matter present in the choreography, human and non-human alike. I see this as a *doing* as much as a horizon of thought. One can always apply this set of thinking to a given performance; however, I believe that in order for the audience to have the experience of distribution of affective potentiality within a piece, one has to work with this explicitly through giving the different bodies time and space.

Research questions

The point of departure for all the performances of this research is the perspective of the audience. I am concerned with the audiences' embodied cognition of the work, as well as with creating affective, liminal spaces where there is potential for change to take place within or amongst them and the world (Bieringa, Ingvartsen, Goldberg, Hall, Holden, Styve Holte and Sortland, personal communication 2014–2018). This point of departure is formative to the research questions, choreographic principles developed, and the performances in themselves. Hence, my choreographer's perspective is a constant speculation of or negotiation with an audience perspective.

This is inherent in my first research question: 'How can particular choreographic principles employed in the performances create potentiality for affect to occur *amongst the audience*?' The follow-up question is: 'How can this affect generate new or altered states, experiences, thoughts and ideas?'

On one level, all choreography can be understood as having affect-creating capacities in the sense that *anything at all* can be understood as having affect-creating capacities. This is different from working explicitly with producing the

potentiality for affect to occur through the development of specific choreographic principles. Given that Massumian affect could be any type of pre-cognitive change in the capacity to affect and be affected, it is hard to discuss in specific terms.

Therefore, I have throughout the research operated with altered states as a stand-in notion. When talking about the work with people not familiar with the affect term, I would say that I am interested in seeing whether my performances could create altered states, often exemplifying them with dream-like states, states of deep concentration, meditative states and hypnotic states. This also makes specific the types of affect in which I am interested.

There is no one definition of altered states. However, in this context, I approach altered states as something out of the ordinary, outside of language and cognition. Following Deleuze, an altered state could be the liminal space produced by a fundamental encounter; that shock of sensibility (O'Sullivan, 2006), hence corresponding with my understanding of Massumian affect.

Artistic-academic working processes

As a PhD fellow in artistic research, there were two main *modi operandi* for the investigation of these research questions; the phase in between productions and the actual production phase. Whilst a production period usually lasts for four to eight weeks (in my case, times six), the rest of the 36 months/156 weeks of the research was spent in the in-between phase. Typical research in those periods would be to develop choreographic ideas and prepare for the respective production through creating movement in the studio, read, write and look at reference materials such as those laid out in the introduction chapter. During production time, I led rehearsals and was in dialogue with the different artistic collaborators (performers, light designers, composers, set and costume designers and outside eyes) to develop the movement material, light design, sound, set design, costume and dramaturgy of the performances based on the previously developed choreographic idea. I kept both written and video logs to keep track of the development of the performances. After the productions I wrote reflections on the individual works to build towards a larger written reflection at the end of the PhD. Here, the written articulation of the choreographic principles took place, although they had gradually been forming during preparation for production as well as during production.

The processes of making performances and reading, thinking and writing became interwoven within the research to the degree that I began referring to them as the

doing of *movement-thought* and *thought-movement*. I understand these as producing one another rather than seeing either one as an anterior from which the other springs. To think through movement and move through thinking has been elaborated by a number of scholars in embodied cognition theory. In the article 'Thinking in Movement', Maxine Sheets-Johnstone argues for a body that thinks through movement beyond representation through language, but instead as 'a way of being in the world, of wondering or exploring the world, of taking it up moment by moment, and living it in the flesh. Thinking in movement is thus not a matter of a symbol-making body, but of an existentially declarative body' (Sheets-Johnstone, 1981, 406). These ideas informed my approach to developing the choreographic principles of this research.

Four choreographic principles

The main purpose of the choreographic principles developed within this research was to create the potentiality for affect to occur amongst the audience. The principles are directly linked to the research questions of the project rather than being general methods for development of choreography. Examples of general choreographic methods used by most dancers and choreographers could be approaches such as improvisation, working from movement tasks to create sequences or dances, studying a certain topic in order to generate thematic ideas which in turn would inform the abovementioned approaches, etc. I have used these general methods extensively in my work, too, but have chosen here to focus on the affect-specific principles.

The choreographic principles have primarily been practiced in the choreographic work but have been developed through the thought-movement and movement-thought throughout the research period. Within each of the performances, the choreographic principles are weighted differently.

This article discusses the different choreographic principles and what I see as their affective potentiality. It positions the principles in relevant contexts and illustrates them with examples of how they have been practiced in the choreographic work as well as in the context of choreographers who work with similar principles.

First choreographic principle: Kinaesthetic transference

The physical and affective condition of kinaesthetic transference suggests that an audience member can experience the movement of a performer in her own body

when sat (still) watching. This potential lies in the fact that audience members are bodies with kinaesthetic knowledge, and that watching, hearing and feeling empathy for another person's movement are both visual and a visceral experience (Fraleigh, 1987). When experiencing someone sway in front of you, there is a good chance you will start to *feel* this swaying motion in yourself as well as see it. I therefore understand kinaesthetic transference as something which always operates within the realm of Massumian affect in the sense that movement can pass from body to body without necessarily involving mental cognition.

One could claim kinaesthetic transference potential within all movement and on behalf of all dance performances. I believe, however, that it exists to a larger extent within quotidian movement that most people use and recognise physically, such as running, jumping, swaying, shaking, rocking, etc. Therefore, most of my performances consist of movement material developed from these types of action. The material often repeats over a long period, for the audience to have time to perceive and tune in (more in the chapter on *Minimal composition: slowness and repetition*).

The idea of kinaesthetic transference also extends to the transference between non-human and human bodies. In *Cosmic Body*, a row of eight lumpy sculptures swings like a pendulum, and a large fan spins around in the air. My experience is that these bodies' movements also have an effect on the audience, perhaps in manners related to that of a pendulum used in hypnosis or of a bus whooshing past.

Kinaesthetic transference is particularly foregrounded in *Shadows of Tomorrow* where it also doubles as the meta theme of the piece. Here, the attempt was to try to create an experience of listening to music, only in silence. Most people would agree that (rhythmic) music is something that affects us physically. We will often start moving our bodies to the beat without thinking about it. A similar thing happens in *Shadows of Tomorrow*. As the performers shake, sway and curve their way around the space, it is common to see audience members rocking in their seats. There is a transmission of motion taking place from the bodies of the performers to the bodies of the audience.

Second choreographic principle: Minimal composition: slowness and repetition

Most of the performances in this research consist of a small number of movement themes executed by the different performers. In *Deep Field*, running is the only

movement theme, and it goes on for the one-hour duration of the performance. *Diorama* has only two: a slow crawl on the ground and a slow standing-up with the hands above the head. *HOODS* has about five different movement themes through which the performers transform. Each of these has an extended duration. Some of them are very slow, whilst others consist of repetition. Often, the movement themes are close to quotidian movement: crawling, swaying, rocking, rolling and running.

In 2012, I was fortunate to witness the performance *Devotion Study #1 – The American Dancer* by choreographer Sarah Michelson at the Whitney Biennale in New York City. Here, the performers execute complex spiral patterns consisting of backward triplets⁶, travelling through space for a total of two hours straight. Their only 'breaks' were whilst balancing on their toes with their arms stretched straight out to the sides of their bodies. The performance was an extreme exercise in repetition and stamina on behalf of both the dancers and the audience members, and became fundamental to how I have thought about the connection between affect and duration and repetition in my own work.

In *Cosmic Body*, the piece starts with the four performers walking calmly to a row of pendulum sculptures hung in the middle of the space. They lift two sculptures each and drop them simultaneously to set the pendulums in motion. The performers disappear to the outskirts of the space, and the audience is left watching the developing movement and patterns of the pendulums, almost until they are still again. Similarly, with *Diorama*, the piece is so minimal that the audience (feet in sand, or sometimes snow) will spend as much time looking at how the waves hit the shore and feeling the wind on their faces as they do looking at the performers.

Experience is subjective and contextual, and is closely knit to expectation and the *willing* of a given situation. An audience that has come to see a performance generally expects something to happen. Approaching these expectations with very slow, minimal, repetitive and/or monotonous movement themes is an attempt to attune the audience. My experience is often that the approach makes people give up on expectation and, at best, find another mode of watching, hearing or feeling new

⁶ A triplet is a dance step where the performers travel through space alternating between bent knees and flat feet on the floor (*plié*), and steps on straight legs balancing on the ball of the foot (*demi pointe*).

details or small variations within what was at first glance just *one* thing. I believe that there is potentiality for affect to occur within this slight alteration of temporality and the consequential shift of attention.

Repetition can also have a suggestive or trance-inducing effect. This is explained physiologically through how given frequencies can synchronise with wavelengths in the brain and produce certain states. When working with *Cosmic Body*, we performed tests where light and sound were synched at the frequency of 10Hz. This frequency is supposed to resonate with your alpha brainwaves and induce a hypnagogic (sleep-like) state (Blanc, 2012).

In the case of minimal composition: slowness and repetition, I believe that the principle works both cognitively in the sense of altering the tempo and level of attention within an audience member's perception, but also physically through how watching repetitive movement may produce a kinaesthetic response in the bodies of the spectators. This is an example of how both the main schools of affect theory overlap in the work, not being understood as exclusive to one another.

Third choreographic principle: Multi-referencing

I believe that an original or new idea is a rare thing. The circulation of memes, information and imagery in our time constitutes different, common imaginaries, which to some extent suggests that one cannot *not* work multi-referentially; there is no outside of reference. Yet this does not indicate that one cannot *have* new experiences, as no one has 'seen it all'.

In my work, I employ multi-referencing as a choreographic principle through actively referring to a multiplicity of different things and contexts simultaneously within a piece. The attempt is, through overload, to empty out the different references' content and meaning in order for new experiences to occur. When these experiences become sufficiently opaque, not bound or domesticated by understanding, I believe that the potentiality for affect occurs. I see multi-referencing as a principle that primarily produces *opacity* (Glissant, 2009, 189–194), and if one does not know how to categorise or think of something, there is potentiality for the unpredictable and unforeseen to emerge. The quest *to understand* always implies a simplification, reduction and domestication limited by our *capacity* to understand (Glissant, 2009). I would like my work to encourage ways to watch and be-with that do not immediately involve judgement and categorisation, but instead let the other be.

A personal encounter with the above happened in my 2011 experience of the performance *Scratching on Things I Could Disavow: A History of Art in the Arab World* by Lebanese artist Walid Raad at Kunstenfestival in Brussels. The performance took shape as a lecture performance; however, one gradually realised that the content presented in the lecture could not possibly be factual. Or could it? This performance initially made me question the credibility of the stories presented and here creating *cognitive confusion*. But later it also made me question the very limits of performance as a genre, where this particular work left me in opacity. At the same time, *Scratching* was a highly affective experience.

In *Shadows of Tomorrow*, I collaborated with Elena Becker on the costume design. The initial idea was to try to blur the individual bodies of the performers and create a mesh or a large collective body. For inspiration, I was looking to the music genre of psychedelic hip-hop, where the aesthetic of album covers, posters and clothes bear resemblance to the multi-coloured, complex, and often kaleidoscopic patterns of the acid trip aesthetics of the 1960s. In order to blur the transition from one body to the next, we came up with the idea of using multiple layers of wide clothes in a range of different colours and patterns, and started doing a few tests with jackets, shirts and long skirts.

Several immediate connotations came up. One was of women's fashion within Roma communities, where a common feature is that of mixing patterns and using several layers of clothes on top of each other. A second connotation was the costumes worn by the Egungun spirits in vodun ceremonies in Benin and Nigeria, which had caught my interest through research into ritual dance as well as the work of photographer Phyllis Galembo (Galembo and Okeke-Agulu, 2010). A third association was the 2013 spring/summer collection by Kenzo (which later gained mainstream popularity through their similar looking 2016 collaboration with H&M). The Kenzo collections were also already clearly multi-referential in themselves.

For us, it became important not to stay strictly within one of these references, but rather to blend them all together to create a multiplicity of different connotations or, ideally, an overload that emptied out previous, potential readings. My impression is that if an element of a piece points too strongly to a given context, the whole piece is understood or interpreted through that context, and this often becomes reductive. Instead, we tried to fuse sufficient connotations into the costumes for the audience to

understand that it is not primarily about decoding these references, but rather to see what the costumes *do* in the context of the performance.

Yet when combining the costumes with movement and light, the sensorial aspects of the performance become as prevalent as the potential cognitive readings of what is seen. Again, this is an example of how I have tried to work simultaneously with logics from the affect theories of Massumi and Tomkins.

Fourth choreographic principle: Performer as matter

Seeing the performances as choreographic assemblages suggests thinking of the performers as matter amongst other matter. This does not imply a diminution of the performers' value as collaborators but rather tries to show how I approach choreography as something that is all-encompassing. In the performances, attention is given to human, non-human, natural, cultural, real or fictional matters without any immediate hierarchy between them. But it is necessary to separate the approach to performer as matter as horizon of thinking and as *doing* within my work.

When a performer looks like a glittery rock (*Diorama*), it is not what makes her 'material'. She could also just look like herself and be as much material in Bennett's sense (Bennet, 2010) and in the context of Choreography as Assemblage. But for the pieces to perform in a way where human and non-human performers exist equally in the eyes of a possibly anthropocentric audience, I use two different approaches, which can help shift the focus and align the different matters present in the performances.

One approach used in *Diorama*, *HOODS* and *Shadows of Tomorrow* is that the performers wear masks or hide their faces in the costume. There is an anthropocentric tendency to favour the human when watching something, and I find myself especially drawn to faces where we look for expressions of what the other person is thinking and feeling. The faces of the performers provide access to social and psychological space. When the performers are masked, my experience is that attention shifts towards the movement of the assemblage which the human and non-human performers constitute rather than towards the performers executing the movement, and as such a collective impersonality is activated.

Another approach developed through *Cosmic Body* and *Deep Field*, where the performers' faces are visible, is to place emphasis on the common rather than on the individual regarding style and quality of movement material and how it is composed.

The performers will often move in unison, there is little change of dynamics within a given sequence and there is often a lot of repetition. In *Deep Field*, the performers keep running in patterns, where the pattern produced between them gradually becomes more visible to me than the individual runner. Also, the performers remain straight-faced throughout, and make no intentional eye contact with the audience.

The choreographic work with matter, or work that sees the performer as matter, has become a way for contemporary choreography to resist anthropocentric performances of the self, which are such a large part of the current neoliberal condition (Lepecki, 2016). This approach to performance in dance, where the personal is removed, can be traced back to, for instance, the Judson Dance Theatre. Here, the expressive mode of performing one's individualism known from modern dance of the time (e.g., in the work of Martha Graham) was replaced by performers with blank faces. In the performance *English* (1963) by Steve Paxton, performers Yvonne Rainer and Paxton used beige face paint that covered eyebrows and lips as a tool to try to erase their differences (Burt, 2006). A more recent example includes the work of Ingvartsen within *Artificial Nature Series* as discussed in the chapter on Choreography as Assemblage. Other examples are Spanish choreographer Maria Jerez' performance *Blob* (2016) and Finnish collective WAUHAUS' *Flashdance* (2016) where in both cases the performers stay underneath a large fabric or plastic sheet throughout the performance and manipulate it into various shapes from within.

When the human performers of the pieces are framed as matter, I believe they become less available for interpretation. On the one hand, there is a level of cognitive confusion in this in the sense that movement can operate 'separately' to the performer executing it. At the same time, Massumian affect also comes into play through the kinaesthetic transference working from non-human to human as much as between human bodies. Again, I believe that the potentiality for affect can occur both through Massumian and Tomkins school understandings of affect.

Epilogue

The background of this research was a belief in art as a motor for change through taking the role as 'utterly useless' in a society where most other things have a given and known purpose. The central aspect of the research was the development of four choreographic principles. A common objective of the principles was to help the audience to be able to zoom in on the embodied experience of watching and being with the work, and ideally to produce the potentiality for affect to occur.

A particular focus has been to experience and articulate how these principles operate within the realm of Massumian affect as well as within Tomkins school affect. This implies a blurring of the division between the two or working them simultaneously.

The research in affective choreographies has provided an opportunity to articulate my methodical practices through the lens of affect. This has helped me to develop the choreographic expression further through approaching the work more systematically. On a general level, I find that artistic research in affect is relevant to a large number of artistic researchers considering how affect can provide a framework to discuss liminal experiences, with or within language.

'Affect has the potentiality to disrupt our systems of knowledge, challenge our ways of being in the world and force thought in a manner that produces a rupture with habit, an altered state. The rupturing encounter also contains a moment of affirmation, the affirmation of a new world, where we see and think this world differently.' (Fiksdal, 2018)

About the author

Ingri Midgard Fiksdal is an Oslo-based choreographer and artistic researcher. She finished her PhD in 2019 with the project *Affective Choreographies*. She is currently working on several projects addressing the intersection between the posthuman and the decolonial from a feminist perspective. Her choreographic work has in recent years been performed at Kunstenfestival in Brussels, Palais de Tokyo in Paris, Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago, Santarcangelo festival and Beijing Contemporary Dance Festival, alongside extensive touring in Norway.

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