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June 2017

An essay on After Contemporary

After Contemporary has been a very ambitious project from the start. It began six years ago when my colleague, a Russian dancer, performance artist and curator Olga Sorokina and myself started to ponder what was happening in the realm of dance and choreography since we had the feeling that everything had been happening already and there was no excitement or freshness in what we were seeing and perceiving. Was that just a state of depression or a foresight? These thoughts I am shearing with you are based on the notion that dance is and is not an closed entity in the present socio-political world. It can be looked as art or as activity and -even if we like it or not- we are bound to our own personal histories both in the legacy of dance and our personal past as a member of society. I am looking at these dance related questions from European, American and Scandinavian view points.

About the platform:

A manifesto:

Looks like the cultures and nations remain with the individual cultural references also in the near future. After Contemporary is a platform to make visible those differences in order to **appreciate** the richness of our human nature.

Olga and myself wanted to explore further this feeling or idea of “after contemporary” and we asked our colleagues Hilde Rustad from Norge and Bo Madvig from Denmark to join the project. It became clear from the start that each of us had a different cultural background despite our geographic closeness and similarity in our educational backgrounds- Hilde, Bo and myself had been in SNDO in the 1980s and 90s and Olga had a long experience in contact improvisation and somatic work. We met first in Helsinki 2011 among us and talked a lot about our wishes for the project to come. In 2013 I was the artistic director of the Fullmoon dance-festival and the theme of the festival became After Contemporary. During the whole festival we had After Contemporary-camp which included talks, round-tables and performative lectures by artists. Hilde, Bo and Olga gave lectures and other speakers where Marjo Kuusela, Keith Hennessy and Robert Steijn. Next year we met at the BodyWord-festival in St. Petersburg where Hilde, Bo and myself gave a workshop, performed together and gave lectures. 2015 we were hosted by MADHOUSE Helsinki where we had a two days event with performers and lectures from Austria, Norway, Russia, Denmark and Finland. In 2016 we were participating in Seminarium# 6 in Sandnes, Norway and in IceHot-festival in Copenhagen.

We had a small funding from Kulturkontakt Norden 2011-13 and a larger one 2015-17. The first event where we gathered articles was in Fullmoon Dance - festival 2013.

During our working session and the commonly organized events we were getting to know each others backgrounds and personalities and slowly the differences became more articulated in a positive sense.

The question of democracy in dance is linked to the democracy in the society. In a democratic state it is somewhat easier to accept and to live the idea of democracy than in a dictatorship where democracy is a utopian idea and not always a goal shared by the majority of its citizens. Nevertheless striving for non-hierarchical, communal and shared methods in creating anything have often been vital in dictatorships in order to survive where as democracies give their citizens a possibility for individual thinking and also treat the solitaire as an accepted and somewhat idealized norm.

After Contemporary platform has aimed to offer a space for discussion based on democracy and responsibility. Each of us has been committing in providing a suitable platform and context for After Contemporary event in our own countries. A common nominator for each of us has been the practice of contact-improvisation, sharing the idea of a non-hierarchical body and the importance of touch which are related to the C-I form.

Legacy

In order to talk about After Contemporary I would like to share some thoughts about the legacy and its relation to the time we are living. In the Fullmoon dance Hilde¹ gave a lecture where she pointed out the importance of the legacy and recognition of ones own tradition as a dance artist. The acknowledgement and the naming of the legacy but also the naming the norms embedded in that legacy give us the perspective and understanding of our relation to the world and locates us in the field of dance. Hilde's lecture made me recognize and appreciate my education at SNDO 1982-86 from a new angle. The curriculum was a mixture of techniques of Cunningham, Pauline de Groot (based on Hawkins), ballet and Limon taught by people with an expanding knowledge of somatic practices (kinesiology, Alexander-technique, BMC), contact improvisation and improvisation skills. The school had at its core an idea of a dancer as an independent artist and a maker. In the program there were many projects based on scores and tasks and we created our own material in collaboration with the choreographer. It was a process oriented education.

I remember John Rolland, the teacher of ideokinesiology, saying that nobody new what kind of dancers would come out of this education which was something unheard of in the existing modernistic legacy of European dance. It took me a long time to see my work having a legacy. The work I did was considered as

¹ Rustad, Hilde: Postmodern dance as tradition, lecture; After Contemporary camp, Täydenkuun tanssit, Pyhäsalmi, 2013

marginal in the field of Finnish contemporary dance and realizing my legacy gave the work a history and a home.

I think understanding ones legacy is extremely important.

According to the media theorist Douglas Rushkoff the fact that we are capable of making abstractions offers us the potentiality to distance ourselves from the work and we fail to see the labour that originally went into making of something².

We end up relating to our abstracted maps as if they were the territory instead of just representations.³ Rushkoff suggests that “since everything is rendered instantly accessible via Google and iTunes the entirety of culture becomes a single layer deep. The journey disappears and all knowledge is brought into the present tense”.⁴ An eternal horizon, eternal now. This is interesting in relation to dance practices where the traditional training methods have been bound to time and the amount of the practice of skills and stamina has been at the core of the dance art everywhere in the world. Are we losing the idea of a process in favor of a product?

Rushkoff suggests that as a substitute for the process over time a temporal compression takes the form of a mashup. For ex. how a dj plays different musical eras on top of each others creating as mashup of existing material⁵ and the original creations become hidden.

On the other hand, a mashup is nothing new for the contemporary dance art since it is maybe one of the most historyless art forms -both nationally and internationally- and somehow has been keeping up with its time until now inventing the wheel over and over again. Even though the layers of various legacies are there they seem often to be hidden from the conscious mind. It looks like the dance continues without being able to articulate its own thoughts and values imbedded in the contemporary practices.

Ballet is in this respect carrying the legacy through old academies.

Even though ballet has not been the topic in After Contemporary- just thinking of about it in our context gives some interesting information. Olga, Hilde, Bo and myself come from a slightly different cultural and sociopolitical backgrounds. Bo and Hilde from Scandinavian monarchies, Olga from Russia with a past in a Sovjet form of communism and Czars and myself from a relatively young republic with no own royalty ever. Our cultural backgrounds could be looked at through the ballet legacy of each country: the Danes have a long tradition of Bournonville school and Russia had its own tradition of the ballet supported first by the czars and then the Vaganova Academy which is thriving in St. Petersburg. Norway and Finland are maybe closest to each others with a young history of ballet independent from the court.

² Rushkoff, Douglas: Present shock, p.139

³ Rushkoff, p.139

⁴ Rushkoff, p.153

⁵ Rushkoff, p.154

Although we all had a dance education which was “something completely different” we each came back to own our countries and our work was defined by the norms of the existing dance culture. In the 80’s in Finland it was ballet, jazz ballet, Graham and tanztheater. We have all been pioneering in our countries with many others who were knowledgeable in these new practices and have shifted the paradigms and thinking in our own dance cultures.

In 2011 our main questions where

- 1) Where is dance heading?
- 2) what defines this evolution?
- 3) how can we discuss this?

Since then there have been many changes in the socio-political situation in the world but I will confine myself here to the realm of the dance art. It seems that the dance art presented in production houses generally embraces wider scope of work since 2011. This notion comes from looking into big European festival programs like Tanz Im August, Impulstanz and Julidans where a larger variety of work is presented as dance. But if I look closer there seems to be also a new established understanding of what kind of a work is NEW and acceptable- and has the biggest profit value- which of course is part of the landscape of the dance market.

What I am seeing after 30 years of working in the field is that a lot of dance productions continue to look like they have their roots in ideas and strategies that derive from the 1960’s and 70’s with Cunningham and Cage, the Judson Dance Theater and even earlier from Marcel Duchamp⁶. This is a complex topic and I will stick to the NEW--- I will come to this concept of new later.

In the After Contemporary camp during the Fullmoon dance-festival in 2013 our questions became more articulated. The themes about *stability, norms, legacy, gender, chaos, queer, fake, post-colonial, indigenious, authenticity and borderlessnes*- just to mention the few- are still valid today even though It seems like the articulation about these issues has become clearer.

⁶ Rustad, Hilde: Traces of Duchamp in postmodern tradition, lecture; Postmodern dance in Finland?-event, Helsinki 2016

From legacy to after contemporary

The question of the content in contemporary art is by no means valid only in dance. In What is Contemporary Art-article in the e-flux-journal Julieta Aranda, Brian Kuan Wood, Anton Vidokle are saying: “that much of the activity responsible for the current condition of art **is no longer under development** but has assumed a fully mature form – and yet it still somehow refuses to be historicized as such”. They also think that “ perhaps the contemporary project as fully formed cultural project with certain defined parameters, complete with logics of inclusion and exclusion not so different of the modernist project”.⁷

In my notes I find a quote from an Australian choreographer and dancer Russell Dumas:

“ From reading Foucault it is evident that to initiate change to practices it is first necessary to **destabilize fields**, be they thought or movement based. In dance, stabilized standing and walking body has been currency for so long in practices of ballet that it has become the singular way in which we aestheticise the body and the way we unconsciously attribute value and define beauty within dance practices.

As an embodied practice an adjacent problem for dance as a field of thought, is its relationship to habits and identity at a personal level that become conflated with the idea of national identity in the nation state.

The relationship we have to our embodied habits creates a conservative community that is resistant to change- we define ourselves by our habits and once defined, it is difficult to change.”⁸

Dumas touches the core of our western dance culture and its embodied relation to the values of the society which is rapidly reshaping itself. How is this reflected in dance art?

In my mind the term Contemporary Dance could be defined in two ways in the Western tradition:

-something that happens Now and is contemporary (a relation to the etymology)

- a style that has been influenced by forms like modern dance, tanztheater and neoclassical ballet and continues to be in favor or clear, outreached line and shapes in the space and/or a touching story. Contemporary dance could also be including now the so called New Circus with its highly skillful and often entertaining acts. In this case contemporary dance is something that is built on the past but claims to be the future, is highly stylized and politically supports the institutionalized

⁷ Aranda, Wood, Vidokle: e-flux journal #11- December 2009

⁸ Dumas, Russell: Northern Light, rationale, p.1

system and does not want to change.

Or another point of view from Keith Hennessy's talk in 2013:

“The word “contemporary,” especially when used to describe dance, is intentionally vague, slippery, unstable. It suggests postmodern while avoiding the contradictions and debates evoked by that term. Simultaneously, contemporary refuses to commit to a clear relationship to Modernism or any other historically bound forms, traditions or philosophies. In one essay, dance scholar Andre Lepecki has shifted from saying “contemporary dance” to “recent dance” as a way to discuss dance works made in the past 20 years, without trying to locate them within a specific line of aesthetics or history.”⁹

So what Keith talks about is in my mind already postmodern dance or contemporary related to its etymology. And so we stumble on the notion of what contemporary REALLY means...

Defining the language

What has been and still is the most difficult task in thinking about and dealing with the question of After contemporary is how to define the language we talk with and to whom we are talking. Our project has been from the start an artistic project and our language has been personal without aiming to access academia with it. But here we are. Walter Benjamin talks about thought-image which are dialectical images in written form, literally constellations-become-writing in which the dialectic of image and thought is unfolded and becomes visible¹⁰. In my simple interpretation it means seeing language as a layer of abstraction based on the images we have before creating a spoken language of symbols. The themes of understanding, translating and referring to have been present in our discussions about the dance which happened in English. An important realization has been for example how Russian and English differ from each other as their syntaxes and the mindset they create for imagery and thus for understanding the logics.

I look at the original question of after contemporary and they still create an open platform for the possibilities, or would one say potentialities, for the future.

One of our themes was borders. By movement we will always shift the border, not always go through it, but *destabilize fields* as Russell mentioned. With the internet culture the borders between myself and the world of machines, the internet and its algorithmic mind have become more undefined. Could it be that this influences the borders between the dance practices which have become more permeable? The styles and possibilities are mixing together

⁹ Hennessy, Keith, After Contemporary, Talk with collective action p.2

¹⁰ Weigel, Sigrid: Body- and Image-Space, re-reading Walter Benjamin, p.51

via youtube and other portals opening up a lot but also confusing and changing our perception of time and scale. What defines me as a dancer in the after contemporary?

One way to look into the now is quote Keith Hennessy who suggests:

“Because the universe functions materially and energetically in fractals, in patterns of repetition of varying scale, patterns that are not identical but similar with endless and even chaotic variation...we are already after contemporary as well as contemporary, Modern, neo-classical, classical, traditional, and folk. Yes ballet is a European and white ethnic dance form, as first analyzed by Joanne Kealihohomoku in 1970, but ballet is or could be simultaneously avant-garde, romantic, experimental, traditional, Disney cartoon, totalitarian, militaristic, and contemporary...depending on the way it is made and the way it is experienced and the way it is imagined. So maybe the first sign of “after contemporary” is an awareness of multidimensionality in both space and time, a conceptual choreographic practice that experiences history and environment as multiplicities, as three-dimensional spirals, as fractals in the dancers' body and the choreographers' imagination...”¹¹

How can we make space and trust our skills and intuitions in the flood of information? What is the nature of the information and how will it shape the dance making?

Now

I believe that as dancers who have been improvising and training our perceptive skills for years we do understand how to move about in this new era since we are accustomed to react to changes in the space time and are fine tuned to read the microchanges in our environment. We need to trust ourselves in this without “closing the borders” but also being aware of them.

In 2015 I was listening to a lecture by Nita Little which was held in a IDOCDE-seminar Teaching the Formless in Vienna. Nita belongs to the core group of contact improvisation together with Steve Paxton, Nancy Stark Smith, Daniel Lepkoff and Curt Sidall and has since then been practicing, developing and teaching CI. She has a PhD in Performance Studies (2014) from the University of California, Davis and her dissertation *Articulating Presence: Creative Actions of Embodied Attention in Contemporary Dance* is highly recommendable reading.

The theme of the lecture was the politics of formlessness. Nita emphasized the recognition of absence and the formlessness in the dance making.

She talked about the importance of paying attention to those experiences of appearance and disappearance- of actions and thoughts and intensities- by tuning our perception and attention through the bodily practices.

¹¹ Hennessy, Keith, p.2

In his lecture in Fullmoon Dance Bo Madvig¹² was suggesting that some of the somatic practices, like the ideokinetic practices, where we were laying on the floor for one year imagining and embodying the anatomical body resulted sometimes in states similar to trance or shamanistic practices. Keith Hennessy also refers to rituals he has been practicing with neo-pagan, feminist witches since 1980s where one suddenly was slipping into “between the worlds” where the idea of future and past are simultaneously present within a ritual circle.¹³ Here we enter to the space of chaos and far-from equilibrium-complexity where we have to navigate disorder without a clear definition of the mess and without a coherent ideological position¹⁴, to not know in order to find out something that was there already but we did not yet perceive it.

And from here arises another angle of extreme importance and of extreme difficulty: that of the question of the need of naming the unnamed, recognizing the norms and borders of the contemporary dance over and over again and finding our relation to those issues in order to move on in the after contemporary space **as a free artist, free to pursue a hunch.**

Mårten Spångberg proposes in his essay “Post-dance, an Advocacy “ that we are not living in a culture of New but in a neoliberal capitalism which has only expansion in mind and where “new” functions as **a reactive new**. It is a term coined by Deleuze meaning that is consolidates what is already approved and is not proposing something unknown but a possibility based on the already known¹⁵. Deleuze also introduces other term, “**an active new**” that must emerge from potentiality, a new that does not belong to the domain of the knowledge of the possible.¹⁶ In the same essay Mårten points out how dance as an art form, as in opposition to choreography, which operates in the world of known and possibility instead of potentiality – is a matter of the emergence of the Active new. This active new is dangerous and with a possibility of breach, of non-calculable or contingent change.¹⁷ He also refers to this unnamed place by saying: “The magic is dance”¹⁸ and further states that what he calls post-dance happens when dance acknowledged that it carries its own agency, carries potentiality into the world.¹⁹ Postdance is not quite like the After contemporary but certainly they both carry a potential for the future.

Liberal Arts Professor of Philosophy Dennis J. Schmidt proposes that art in general gives us a possibility to make sense of our world and ourselves. We do

¹² Pentti, Liisa: Personal notes from After Contemporary Camp, 2013

¹³ Hennessy, p.2

¹⁴ Hennessy, p.4

¹⁵ Spångberg, Mårten: Post-dance, an Advocacy, p.11

¹⁶ Spångberg:p,11

¹⁷ Spångberg:p,12

¹⁸ Spångberg, p.12

¹⁹ Spångberg, p.15

most of the things out of need or purpose but art emerges out of the void of the **freedom and play**. He refers to Heidegger who was worried that our own doings and productions might be capable of foreclosing the open character of that space. That is: our own productive efforts would close off something necessary for the movement of life, an open space that is NOT defined by purpose, intention, need or reason.²⁰

After contemporary is an ongoing inquiry, a multilayered space- time, a swamp as a messy, fertile regions between land and water, with borders that shift depending on the season and the weather and hosting many species that migrate or can be found in multiple contexts or eco-systems²¹ We should work to keep the access open in order for the movement to continue in whatever form it will take and to which ever direction we as a human race are going. Humanity changes and we don't know yet how- lets keep on navigating with the incredible skills we have.

Thank you!

²⁰ Schmidt, Dennis J: Between the word and image, p.102-103

²¹ Hennessy, K.,p.1

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