

Embodying Theory

by

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Abstract

In my paper I will examine the way in which choreographic works can both embody and have a direct effect on theorising. My PhD research comprises a double-edged enquiry into philosophical issues of identity and individuation in relation to dance works, more specifically into 'open' dance works, integrating practical and philosophical thinking. The 'open' work is a work which has a protean form, whose instantiations differ, sometimes radically, from instantiation to instantiation. In my paper I claim that the works I am presenting in my PhD portfolio embody the theoretical enquiry and its (provisional) results, and that there is a symbiotic relationship between theory and practice. I demonstrate that, during the course of my research, not only did my dance 'thinking', that is the thinking that takes place in and through my choreographic practice, undergo radical change (for example, the kind of work I was making changed radically during the research process) but also that the changes in my practice demanded that I make a substantial epistemological shift in my philosophical thinking.

In my paper I examine the philosophical notion of 'thinking in the work', contrasting it to thinking about the work, and examine its role in my research process. I also discuss the way in which my own works embody my research findings. Particular reference is made to one work in my portfolio. Through demonstration and/or video presentations three versions of the work will be presented to focus the theoretical discussion.

Simon Waters, in the introduction to his doctoral thesis, argues that artistic work has a,

... central role as a laboratory or playground for experiment with ideas, [and] as an instrument for testing analyses and intuitions about the world. p 1¹

My own research, like Waters', operates on the premise that choreography is a valid means of researching into, and also of initiating, intuitions and analyses about concepts (in my case the 'work') and the world.

I have entitled my paper *Embodying Theory*. My PhD research project demonstrates not only the way in which theory influences practice, but also the way in which choreography can both embody and have a direct effect on theorising. My research comprises a double-edged enquiry into philosophical issues of identity and individuation in relation to open dance works, integrating practical and philosophical thinking. The latter serves both as a means of clarifying the conceptual content of my choreographic research, and as an instigating factor in radical new directions in my choreographic practice. At the same time, however, the nature of my choreographic practice has dictated, to a considerable extent, the route that the philosophical thinking has taken.

The portfolio of dance works I am presenting for my PhD includes one theatre work and two interactive works. All are open works, couched in quite different genres. One is a live theatre work, the remaining two are interactive digital works. To date three different productions of the theatre work *Intimate Memories* (1994) have been presented. Two of these I directed, the third was directed by an independent dance director, Kate Thorngren.

¹ Waters 1996

The first interactive digital work I made, *Passing Phases*, (1996-8) is a multi-screen installation work designed to be placed in a gallery rather than a theatre space. The movement materials were choreographed and then treated in such a way as to allow the participant-spectator to generate their own version of the work. These include the fragmentation of the gestures, repetition of very short sections from longer gestures, retrograding the progression of the gestures, and so on. The gestures are also 'sent' around the screens in response to the spectators' movement in the space, moving from one screen to another in a variety of rhythmic patterns. The participant-spectator activates the motion of the images by walking on pressure sensitive pads placed under the carpet. The computer analyses the pressure in terms of distance and number and responds in relation to these.

The second interactive work, *3over9* (1997), is activated by performers. The performers generate the motion of the digitised cast members (which are projected onto screens in the installation space) and the sound. Both music and images operated on completely different sets of interactive strategies. The activation of the music requires detailed movement behaviours from the performers, the air patterns, speed and spatial directions of the performers' limbs triggered sampled sounds and compositional treatments of those sounds in real time. The speed of a movement for example, raises or lower the pitch, or increases the rhythmic pattern of the phrase and so on. The movement of the performers towards and away from the screen also triggers certain sounds. The movement of the performers are the determinants of the motion of the digitised figures. These were either in a state of 'flying' or were standing, walking towards and away from the performers, or squatting. The digitised figures also interacted with each other. In order to control the sound and visual images to some degree, and to generate a dance element which was not merely a trigger but which had its own integrity, I developed an interactive system for the performers. This comprises the kinetic structuring devices and operational rules of a structured improvisation.

The performers operate the three interactive systems simultaneously. The first stage of the practical research was concerned with the development of a set of structures which would service the two interactive systems with which the performers were dealing, and develop an improvised dance piece which was coherent in its own right.

What is common to all these works is that their material forms are protean, and that certain aspects of the conceptualisation underpinning their material instantiations have been passed from the hands of the originating author to the hands of the director, performer, and/or audience.

My research constitutes a genuine dialogue between theory and practice. Neither mode of research has dominated the research process, rather the two modes have continually influenced each other's concerns and progress. This has happened to such an extent that, as a result of the theoretical issues I was addressing, my dance 'thinking' and the kind of works I make underwent a radical change. Concomitantly my practice demanded that I make a substantial epistemological shift in the context of my philosophical thinking.

The body of works I will present in my PhD portfolio embody, or thematise, the philosophical problematics which were responsible for their emergence. These problematics are various but cluster around issues concerning the ontological nature of the open dance work. (My works thematise² other things, but these are not the subject of this paper.)

For much of the twentieth century there has been a lessening of importance of the overt subject matter of artwork and an increase of importance in the object itself as an intentional object. To put this another way, there has been an increasing focus on the way in which the cultural object articulates the thinking which went into its making. The content of such works includes, even privileges, this thought, rendering the process of creating a work not merely the means of achieving an end, but an important component of that

² 'Thematise' is the term used by Richard Wollheim to describe the presence of the 'thinking in the work' in the structure of the work. (Goodman (1976) would use the term 'exemplify'.) See Wollheim (1987) pp 21- 25 for a fuller account of thematisation.

end. It is, if you like, inextricably part of what is 'going on in the work', what one might call the 'work of the work'³, or the 'thinking in the work'.

But what do I mean by 'thinking in the work'? Thinking *in* the work is contrasted to thinking *about* the work (either before or after its creation). Thinking *about* the work is articulated in the form of propositions which describe, explain, or otherwise articulate ideas about the work. Thinking *in* the work, whether it takes the form of question or answer, is articulated in and through the act of making or ordering movements, marks, sounds, etc. This kind of thinking can be art specific (to do with the way the materials of the artform, and/or its underlying assumptions, behave, or can be made to behave), or more philosophical, and is, I would claim, in and of itself a research process. However, rather than being couched in assertions or propositions, the artistic debate (and I use this word deliberately) is couched in nonverbal action.

'Thinking in the work' is an aspect of the rational debate, and is as rational as thinking *about* the work. It is, however, a specific kind of rational thinking, more aligned to practical knowing than to propositional knowledge. The choreographer when making a work does not think "What does this configuration of movements make me want to do?" and then provide a verbal answer which serves as an instruction to him or her for a certain kind of action. Rather, s/he observes that configuration and in response to that acts upon the work, does something to the emerging work (for example, adds or changes a movement, a placement or orientation in the space, a stillness). This causes the configuration, the relations between the parts, to change, initiating a new structure which in turn generates new 'thoughts' (new ideas, new concepts, new specifics with regard to the goal the artist is pursuing), which are immediately transposed into action.

The work-in-progress, upon which the artist acts until s/he releases the work into the public domain, is an ever-changing network of possible relations between elements. This is where its nature as a work-in-progress lies. Any decision made by the artist as s/he acts upon the work causes a shift in the balance of the relations in that network, and consequently generates a new structure, a new step in the artistic 'argument'. The artist perceives possible pathways of development in the changing structures and makes artistic decisions in relation to them. (This constitutes the dialogue between work and artist.) The appropriateness of those decisions in the context of the work is guided by the thinking which is emerging in and through the work-in-progress. (A decision to follow one pathway rather than another may take the piece in a direction which is at variance with the original authorial intention, or even recent intention⁴.) A decision may be taken intuitively, following a hunch, for which no conscious 'reason' can be accessed, or be the result of a conscious analysis of the emerging structures as they stand at that time. This process sees the artist engaging in a continuous interplay between the poietic and esthetic processes⁵, between action and analysis when making a work.⁶

³ Benjamin (1994)

⁴ Most artists have experienced a moment when an apparently impulsive decision leads to a complete reconfiguration of the work, a transformation of the work one thought one was making into a new work one had no idea one was making. This is an example of 'thinking in the work', which comes out of the working process, and not out of a process of thinking *about* the work.

⁵ Nattiez (1990), following Gibson and Molino, has identified three dimensions on the art work. The poietic process is everything that goes into the process of creation, the neutral trace is the material instantiation of the work (the artefact), the esthetic process constitutes the reception of the work by the viewer or listener (or artist) (pp 10 - 17)

⁶ In this they are unwittingly following Action Research Methodologies. Action research, or grounded theory, is a research methodology used extensively in the social sciences. In it the researcher engages in a continuous dialogue between observation action and analysis. Action produces data, which is observed and analysed taking account of the context. The results of the analysis initiate further action, which produces a slightly different context, which in turn affects the action taken. Normally a very broad research question is asked in the initial stages on an action research project. The final, detailed research question only becomes apparent when the dialogue between researcher and the subjects of the research has been established. In the case on artistic research the work itself and the artistic process is the subject of the research. The artist is the researcher, and is led by the work, just as social scientists engaged in Action Research are led by the dialogue which takes place between themselves and a) their 'subjects', and b) context on their research project. (see Moustakis (1990) Glaser (1992))

All the activity in which an artist engages constitutes the debate which is constantly taking place as they make the work. It is worthy of the description 'debate' even though it may not be articulated in words. It is notable that several of the features of rational thought obtain in the description I have given of the artistic process. The artist's work is intentional goal directed (even though the specific nature of the goal might not be formulated). Relevant aspects of the results of the artistic thinking taking place in the work are identified by the artist and analysed. Artistic decisions and actions are made on the basis of that analysis.

The analysis an artist undertakes when examining his or her work in progress is as rigorous as that undertaken by a philosopher. This notwithstanding, a central feature of what many conceive of as non-rational or pre-rational thought – the hunch, the intuition – is also present in the description I have given of the artistic process. But the artistic hunch is not non-, nor even pre-rational. It is firmly based on antecedent knowledge. This knowledge is, however, tacit, not the propositional knowledge which is the meat of the thought processes of the philosopher or theorist. Tacit knowledge is knowledge which has become assimilated to such a degree that it is part of a complex network of understanding, the roots and progression of which are embedded in the neural and proprioceptive networks of the individual concerned. It has, in Andrew Harrison's terms, become 'worked into the living texture of the mind'⁷

For mature artmakers the tacit knowledge relevant to their work is that which has been built up over many years of experience in the medium. It is also related to their tacit understanding of the theme of the work in hand, whether that theme of a conceptual or a more tangible nature. It is through the employment of his or her art-specific tacit knowledge in relation to the theme of the work that an artist senses what is a 'right' decision to make when in the process of creating a work. The decisions the artist makes in fashioning a work are guided by the emerging work itself.

All this is part of what I call the thinking in the work. The traces of this process are embodied in the product.⁸ The aficionado of an artist's work or of a genre of work, the knowledgeable spectator, is able to recognise the mark of the conceptual process in which the artist engaged, and to identify the kind of thinking which is going on in the work. In this way they gain access to the 'work of the work'⁹.

My current work exploits these notions. However, it takes the one step further. Inasmuch as the ontological status of the open work is necessarily one of 'becoming', in my pieces the process of articulating the work in its material form/s (as tangible artefact) is not completed when the artefact is released into the public domain. The thinking in the work continues after I, as the originating artist, have released it. (In this my works embody post-structuralist theories developed by late twentieth century thinkers such as Barthes and musicologists such as Nattiez.) The poietic process, the working on the work, is thus still in process. All of my recent work is offered to the public as an ongoing activity. The poietic process is carried into and becomes integral to the product. Product and process are literally interdependent.

The product in the case of the work I am currently making is, not an object or an event, the immanent, material form, but a framework for action¹⁰, the use of which will result in a realisation of the work's 'work'. As open works my pieces have no author-determined point of closure, no definitive, even ideal, form. They are not presented as artefacts (although the instantiations are, of course, artefactual inasmuch as the material forms the works take during their careers¹¹ are always in flux, are never stable). My work as artist lies not in the realisations themselves, but in the structures laid out for the work's realisation. The 'work' of the works lies in the conceptualising possibilities they offer the viewer or producer as they

⁷ Harrison 1978 p 44

⁸ The thinking in a work varies in quality from work to work from artist to artist, just as it does from writer to writer, from essay to essay. It may not always be clear, coherent thinking. Rather it may exhibit confusions and lack of experience. However, this thinking is still embodied in the work, resulting in 'poor' works of art.

⁹ Andrew Benjamin (1994) discusses the notion of the 'work' of the work at length. The 'work' of the work is that which continues after the artist has laid down their tools. In the open work, this work is overtly part of the artist's product, the semi-formed artefact.

¹⁰ A subtly different concept from 'instructions for action', the score.

¹¹ A term used by Joseph Margolis (1995) to describe the ongoing development of the work which takes place after its 'completion' by the artist.

construct their instantiations. These conceptualising possibilities, the work's work, are not only self-referential (what is *this* work?) but also more general (what is *a* work?). Under such circumstances Nattiez's poietic and esthetic dimensions are clearly impossible to separate, for the esthetic dimension is also, literally, the poietic dimension. In this the work embodies the structure of the artistic process. The director, performer or spectator's behaviour is itself a stage in the process of creating the work, in the poietic process., This process is, however, also part of the esthetic process, for it is in and through the reception on the 'work-in-process'¹² that the viewer is able to participate in the poietic process, and 'work' the work.

However, the poietic process of my work is not solely choreographic, Much of it lies in the philosophical thinking in which I engage as I grapple with the issues of identity, individuation and authorship that the works I was creating threw up., What did it mean to author a work? How far could the work shift from the original material form and remain the same work? How much control could the author retain and still create a deliberately protean work? These questions both informed and guided the development of my practice and are embodied, articulated, in the works.¹³

Not only my theoretical discussions but also my artistic work challenge the epistemological and ontological base in which much of dance theory concerning identity has been grounded. Both have found it wanting. Notions of sameness based on an ontology of substance and an epistemology dominated by objectivism, have bedevilled dance research in this area for several decades. The latter has not been successful, in part because that 'essence' has been sought in material features rather than organising principles. Theorists have been obliged to modify, or to offer exceptions to the generalised claims for the necessary conditions of dance works which have been proposed (e.g. movement style¹⁴; instructions for performance¹⁵) not because the claims were intrinsically *wrong* (indeed each may be appropriate for certain types of work), but because the ontological position which underlay them was not generalisable across all genres of twentieth century theatre dance practice. It has become increasingly apparent that, rather than an ontology of substance, which encourages the search for material conditions of identity, an ontology of flux¹⁶, which may locate conditions of identity in a less material realm, need to be brought into play, both in theory and in practice. It is this quest for an appropriate ontology for dance works that forms the foundation of my works, and it is my research into it that they embody as works.

Intimate Memories, a stage work created in 1994, was produced in an entirely different version in 1996, and again in 1999 (the latter by an independent dance director). I had nothing to do with the 1999 production, allowing the director completely free reign as to how she interpreted the 'score' and presented the work, thus allowing the work its 'afterlife'¹⁷. The parameters of the work which I originally determined were open to change were, the eukinetic properties, the musical score, the costuming, the gender of the casting, the order in which the duets were presented, the transitions between the duets, the behaviour, activity and placement of the third figure in the duets. In fact the three extant versions of *Intimate Memories* have only one thing in common, the broad choreutic parameters of the movement material choreographed. All of *the* other features were subjected to, sometimes radical, changes. The

¹² The notion of the work-in-process has been formulated to distinguish completed open work from the work-in-progress. The latter is seen as being a work which is not yet completed, not yet one to which the author will put his or her name. The work-in process, conversely, is one with regard to which the author considers his or her work to be completed, but one which is open to intervention at either a conceptual (interpretative) level or at a material level. It is a particularly useful term to use for open works which are necessarily in process at a material level.

¹³ Each work is not even partially revealed by a single instantiation, nor even several instantiations, although each instantiation could be mistaken for a work in its own right - that is it instantiates a profile of the 'work'. The 'work' itself, however, lies in its conceptual, not its material realm. In this my work has much in common with conceptual art, although its surface characteristics may not lead one to make that comparison

¹⁴ Armelagos and Sirridge (1978)

¹⁵ Goodman (1976) Wolterstorff (1980); Thom (1993)

¹⁶ For a more detailed discussion of these two ontological positions see my paper "The Open Work and its Identity" in *Preservation Politics*, due for publication by Dance Books in 1998. (Eventually published in 2000, ed. Stephanie Jordan)

¹⁷ A term used by Jonathan Miller (1986) to describe the status of the work when a production is created which has no input from anyone involved in the original production

expressive surface, and thus semiotic content, of the work altered quite significantly from production to production.

The philosophical question I am asking through this particular work focuses on the ontological issues upon which theories of identity are based rather than on the material conditions which allow us to numerically identify various instantiations of a work as such. The main question posed by the three versions of *Intimate Memories* is – in what sense were the three productions instantiations of the same 'work'? That is, what is the nature of their samenesses? This last question is a major part of the 'work' of this work, and is part of the thinking *in* the work. Further, a (provisional) work-specific answer to the question is embodied in the three instantiations of the work¹⁸. During its career not only did the material form of *Intimate Memories* change, the authorial conception of the central individuating characteristics of the work itself also changed.¹⁹ That is through the continuing thinking *in* the work, the thinking *about* the work changed.

To what theoretical foundations can one appeal in a work which is as much in flux as *Intimate Memories*? The only epistemology which seemed fitting to me was one which accommodated variance, not one which posited an objective invariant truth which acknowledged no positionality. The epistemology that dominated Western thought for two millennia posited an objective world for which there is only one 'true' description. This epistemology has substantially affected our conclusions regarding the ontological status of artworks, including dances, and the status of interpretations of works. The destabilisation of this epistemological position began to take place in the writings of Foucault, Derrida and Barthes in the 1960s²⁰. Since that time their questioning and, particularly in Derrida's case²¹, sceptical stance has become commonplace.

Foucault, Derrida and Barthes posited the world as a text, that is as an interpretable object²². They also questioned whether the mere fact that there has been a *very* longstanding belief that there is an objective world against which we can measure our perceptions and understandings necessarily legitimated it as an inalienable truth. They argued that the nature of that interpretation of 'reality' was based on a privileged episteme and that reason, through which such interpretations are reached far from being rigorously objective, is normative, an artefact of a constructed world.

The notion that there is no objective truth, but that truth is mediated through a variety of factors, including cultural and historical factors, has since been taken up by analytic philosophers and accommodated into their philosophical positions. For some²³ the notion of epistemological variance has been introduced as a regulating concept in their theories. An epistemology that accommodates variance as an essential mode of being for all phenomena is founded on the notion that objectivity is:

....the normative status of truth-claims about any part of the real world, and that it is epistemically constructed with selected criteria for grading particular claims, which criteria are themselves suitably legitimated by the society in question.²⁴

¹⁸ Provisional because there are many more possible approaches to generation instantiations on the work; work-specific because the nature of the identity of this work is specific to *this* work

¹⁹ In *Intimate Memories*, even the parameters which were deemed (on completion of the first production) to be unalterable by the author at the first stage of the 'career' of the work, and thus necessary conditions of identity, were not fixed, but were extended as each new production was conceived. Initially I was open to radical change in the eukinetic features of the work, in the temporal ordering of the duets, in the gender of the cast, in the transitions between the duets, in the music, in the costume and in the setting. Later, as a result of questions from and the actions of the dance director I could envisage myself accepting shifts in the temporal relationships of the solo strands of material from which the duets were constructed.

²⁰ Barthes (1966,1971), Derrida, (1972), Foucault (1972)

²¹ Derrida (1972)

²² Additionally, Margolis's notion of artworks and other cultural phenomena as being 'culturally emergent entities' implicitly acknowledge this position ((Margolis,1988)

²³ Particularly Margolis (1995)

²⁴ Margolis 1995 p 268

'Reality', being constructed by human beings, consequently differs from time to time, and from culture to culture. Although the world and the 'things' within it exist, that world forming the grist from which perception and conceptions of reality are constructed, what we call reality is nothing more than an interpretation of the ontic world. Each period's or culture's construction of 'reality' is constructed on an organising principle which has relevance to the dominant episteme of a culture or time, but no inalienable claim to be an *a priori* truth. This is the conceptual prism through which ontic phenomena are read, made sense of, given meaning. The world is thus a text, in Barthes's and Derrida's terms.

Dance works, I would suggest, are microcosmic versions of the world (indeed we talk of the 'world' of a work), and are equally prone to reconceptualisation across time. *Intimate Memories* is an (admittedly extreme) embodiment of this position. The identity of this dance work lies not only in certain broad ontic characteristics (its construction as a group of duets performed by three people, certain choreutic characteristics of the movement material) but also in its particular nature as a transformable structure (its ontological status). That is, the 'work' of the work, which I consider to be a major individuating characteristic, does not lie in its expressive surface, that which can be identified in the material traces and described, but in the concepts which guide it. In short, the individuating characteristics of the work lie in its organising principles, rather than in its organised form. One of the organising principles of this work is that it is open to continual modification, within protean boundaries, by the creators of subsequent performances. As such it is a challenge to our dominant concept of workhood, and thus to its ontological status as a work.

The other two works in my portfolio extend this debate. Both are collaborative works, the concepts and ideas which drive them being developed out of an interest in the concepts underlying notions of authorship, of ownership, of change as, essential features of the 'work'. The formation of the instantiations of the work are relinquished here not to a director, with its connotations of delegated single authorial control, but, in the case of *3over9*, to performers and, in the case of *Passing Phases*, to the spectators themselves. Both of these works embody the Barthian, Foucauldian, Derridian questioning of the status of the author and the reader and of work itself

Both *3over9* and *Passing Phases* are interactive works in which a genuinely physical interaction takes place between the spectator of the work (more accurately, the participant *in* the work) and the work itself. The spectator or performer has it within his or her power to effect a change in the material form of the work as he/she views it and engages with it. Both pieces are therefore simultaneously texts and works. However, my claim in this context is that the works I create are authored works. They have my marks, and those of my collaborators, upon them. They are not merely texts (although they are that as well), for they embody certain authorial intentions, and thoughts. Those thoughts are often in the form of questions. However, the works also offer spectators a distinctive physical environment (a 'world') in and through which they are able to engage with the more abstract possibilities the work affords. Nevertheless, because they are open to intervention by participant-spectators and/or performers, these 'works' are also actively texts. They demand work from the spectator to become instantiated at any one time.

For the reasons outlined in this paper, I am claiming that, as much of my theoretical research has been concerned with examining the concept of the work, my works, which actively interrogate this concept, embody my theoretical stance. They are consequently a central aspect of my theoretical debate, not merely a demonstration of it, that is, an embodiment of that debate.

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