

On the intelligence of the material

Mira Hirtz talks to Bettina Neuhaus

MH:

1. Entities that are different from the subjective 'I' are named objects. If we use them to shape our ideas, if we touch them to relate to the foreign and the similar, if we mimic them to adopt to the world, we call them material. The understanding of material is not limited to a certain graspable substance, but especially in bodily movement widens to notions as weight, time and space. It is material before even framing it as such, in the process of creation as well as in the process of experience of the audience.

What do you consider as objects within your choreographic work? What is the material you work with?

BN:

The tangible / non-tangible body

As a dance artist the material I work with is probably best described as a configuration of the relationship between different strands rather than specific, distinct 'matter'. I deal with the body in motion, with its tangible living matter, (such as skin, bones, muscles, fluids, connective tissue, etc.) as well as its intangible reality composed of multi-sensorial systems, stored knowledge, experience, intuition, imagination, memory, history, ... In the living body tangible and intangible live and operate as one inseparably interrelated reality. And the inherent nature of this reality is activity, is movement. It is on this level that dance begins: the highly coordinated and tuned orchestration of multiple activities happening simultaneously in the living body and its relation with the changing world surrounding it. Thus, on one level the body is always in a state of becoming, recomposing itself.

Unlike other art forms that work with non-corporeal materials (e.g. a piece of wood, paint or clay) in dance there is an added layer of complexity. The dancer is both: the 'I' and the 'material'. Further, rather than material being worked and shaped into a final form that is more or less solid, static and unchangeable, dance is an ephemeral art form. Within each danced movement are multiple sensations, energies, awarenesses and images that pass through the body and then 'leave' it as they dissolve. The term 'performance' refers to 'performare', which in my understanding doesn't mean that we move 'into' a form. Instead it is through movement that form emerges and moves 'through' the matter. The body is form and creator of form.

This aspect of <moving or passing through>, which goes along with change and transformation is for me key to the nature of dancing and thus it is one of the core principles I'm interested in when performing and making dance work.

Space and time

In working with and through the body as <material> one must acknowledge its existence in space and time. And both space and time are dynamic. Things live in time and have duration. Varying the span of time allocated to a given movement changes that movement, altering its relationship with other elements. Similarly space and body can't be separated: the body is 'in' space and there is no movement without space. But also, space is 'in' the body. Being composed of spacious matter it is itself spatial and in moving creates space, transforming internal space and the space around. As cultural theorist and artist Erin Manning concludes: <Movement is one with the world, not body/world but body-worlding>[1](#). Further each point in space has its specificity. It follows that from each point in space the same movement vibrates differently and lives in a meshwork of different relationships.

Attention as part of the material

In recent years I have become interested in the mobile and relational nature of attention as a mode of consciousness and its role within making and performing. Attention detects details, differences and change. It listens with a certain curiosity and openness to the perception of what is happening. It hears what is being 'said' as something is in the process of becoming. It alters the perceiver and the perceived, the 'I' and the 'material'; it steers their ongoing changing relationship, communicating to the audience and possibly directing their attention. I consider attention to be a significant ingredient of the material and the dance.

In summary - the 'material' in my work is constituted by the ongoing relationship of consciousness, attention, the dynamic body, space and time. Perhaps one way of 'understanding' dance could be to consider it as the materialization of these interrelationships.

MH:

2. Dance is often referred to as a practice that investigates the dichotomies of me and the other, the inside and the outside. If these categories are questioned, then also the initiating point of action is questioned. One can thereby esteem objects and material as more or less active or passive and their own ability of control as more or less absolute.

Who and what is creating within your work? Do you consider the modes of being affected and influenced relevant within your dance?

BN:

Fluidity versus dichotomy

To an extent the distinction between 'inner' and 'outer', between 'me' and 'the other' might help in framing the complexity we are dealing with, offering an understanding of particular manifestations. However this separation and simplification ignores essential facets of our being-in-the-world. As artist I feel the need to question this profoundly established notion of dichotomy and invite into my practice a wider and more fluid understanding of moving and dancing as part of our embodied, environmental and social nature.

Where does the body begin and where does it end? What is inner and what outer? Depending on the context and from which angle we look at these questions we find different insights and answers. For example, considering the skin with its semi-permeability, that allows an exchange of moisture, air and energy with our surroundings, is different from starting with our visual sense that identifies the visible outlines of the body, which is different again from an approach that looks at the body on a subatomic level, where there is no longer any solidity but instead an oscillating field of waves with a unique rhythmical pattern of energy vibration that is individual to each of us. Each perspective provides a different view on the material thus revealing different aspects of it. The essential question is: do we dare to deal with this multiplicity of coexistence? Can we handle the numerous differences within the material, (that is e.g. partially the tangible and partially intangible), in dancing and celebrate both their individuation and integration as we move and compose?

Immersing oneself in the actual activity as mode of creating

Immersing myself in this welling fluidity of the material(s) is the mode I work from and through. If a 'material' is defined as something active it must be an amalgam of multiple activities dormant in it like seeds: A song unravels its multi-layered life only through the activity of singing, which in turn houses further activities such as breathing, vibrating, directing, articulating, voicing, listening, tuning, stilling, imagining... all living together in 'singing'. I immerse myself in singing by engaging body, attention, imagination, compositional mind, intuition, and sense of time, space and poetry as a way to activate the multiple relationships between the 'I', the activity, the surrounding and what unfolds as composition. I'm becoming 'the singing'. Similarly, one could say I'm becoming 'the dancing'. The work unfolds along these multiple relationships moving; moving as a way of making sense and creating meaning: a work that speaks with the collective voice of these many strands.

MH:

3. These questions connect to the notion of the intelligence of the material. The 'I' produces something, at the same time there is something producing. One shapes, as well as one may support something already happening. Looking for the potentiality of material that already exists also implies meeting its partial unavailability that causes a crisis of identification.

How do you encounter the intelligence of the material?

BN:

Intelligence

Every material affords a wide spectrum of specific information concerning its physical properties and internal connections as well as aspects of its ontology, history, evolution, culture etc. These resonate in the material, defining its actuality and highlighting its potential; that is to say they indicate tendencies of direction, movement, new constellations or transformation: possible futures of the material. I believe that this intrinsic information and the interrelation between the different strands within a material can be considered as an 'embodied intelligence'; in the sense of 'intelligentia' (Latin) as the 'faculty of understanding', the ability of discerning and comprehending in the sense of 'reading from in-between' (inter-legere). It is this intelligence within a material that I aim to access through perceptual attention and to which I respond through my actions and choices.[2](#)

Accessing this intelligence is part of getting to know the characteristics of a material and requires more than reflection from a 'distance'. I need to engage with material through activity and by working with it on a bodily level along multiple pathways. It is a way of working from 'within' rather than from without, being 'in' the material and 'in' the dance. This requires opening all one's sensory channels, engaging through deep physicality with mind and body in each movement and being receptive to its 'voice'. Thus I can hopefully hear what a movement <says> in space and time and be receptive to what wants to evolve next. Without noticing the intelligence of the material one might tend to navigate towards static 'ideas' or accumulate 'detached' (movement) material that masks the original one.

To conclude: the 'intelligence' within a material gives direction to its further journeying; it can become a thread the dancer can follow through attention and intuition and it steers an organic evolution of the process that resides from and stays true to the heart of the material.

MH:

4. Having a daily or an artistic practice can change when confronted with an audience. There is a big difference in terms of effect and affect if one relates to the audience in a mode of representation or of witnessing.

Is the material changing within a show? In which dimensions do you work with closeness and sensational impact to abandon a framing judgment?

BN:

In the context of a performance the material changes because of several factors:

Aliveness of material

Underlying its inner corporeal processes as well as the changing world, the living body as material is at any moment in constant flux and transformation. When reproducing movement material these changing factors are always at play (e.g. the state of the body, a performance space with different light, sonic qualities or atmosphere) and give the performer specific information about the actual material living in the present moment. The challenge is to re-access every time the core of the original material, to move with its characteristic flow in time and space and yet to notice and embrace the actual details of difference. In short: to keep au-courant with the material. Only by being vibrant within the actual context can the material have its full life each time anew.

Malleability of different movement material

Material, and particularly movement material, is malleable. However the degree of its elasticity depends on its structure and its relationship to other materials (sound, space, other performers, cues...). Movement material as used in set choreography might be precisely defined in shape, timing and spatial orientation to the last detail. The higher the degree of refinement and the denser the structure of interdependent relationships with other materials, the lower is the degree of malleability, which then needs to be found by the performer on a 'microscopic' level. Instead of applying accurately pre-choreographed movement material, instant composition operates through compositional structures and principles as a way to generate material and composition in the actual moment of the performance. Being engaged in the emerging material as a response to multiple channels of information, the performer

must master a continuous malleability, ranging from microscopic to macroscopic, as a way to find determination and clear choices whilst keeping the material in its core alive.

Audience – performer – material

Dance is by its nature a multi-sensorial art-form but communicates above all on visual and kinesthetic levels. In a performance-situation spectator and performer encounter each other as humans – though not on a verbal level – which accompanies an immediacy of communication on a very bodily, gut level. Bodies speak to bodies as they are heard and seen by bodies, which obviously affects and alters the material. The audience modulates through their perception their individual experience. Through their presence and attention they become part of the actual setting, altering the material because the perceiver changes the perceived and vice versa. As a performer this requires that I sustain an open channel that allows listening without disturbance to the material and the piece; include the moving relationship between me, the material, and the audience in my perception, giving space for each audience member to inhabit their own imagination and experience, thereby revealing new facets of themselves to themselves. Indeed the material is altered by these factors; however it is the performer being ‘in the dance’ who has to navigate and steer the dynamic interplay of these strands in the service of the unfolding material and composition.

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Bettina Neuhaus is a dance artist based in Amsterdam. For more than 25 years Instant Composition and the collaboration with musicians, video artists and poets have been at the core of her choreographic and performative work. As a dancer she performs in different international ensembles, creates solo work and performative installations often combining dance with acoustic and visual elements. She studied dance at the Theatreschool in Amsterdam and holds a Masters in Creative Practice Dance from Trinity Laban Conservatoire of Music and Dance in partnership with Independent Dance, London / UK as well as a Masters in Music from the Folkwang University of Arts in Essen. Bettina is a certified Skinner Releasing Teacher and teaches SRT and Instant Composition extensively at major academies, festivals and studios in Europe and South America. In recent years her artistic practice has centered on the question of how the mobile and relational nature of attention can inform process from daily practice to making into performing. Her lecture demonstrations *The unfolding image* (2014) and *The body in space and spaces of the body* (2015) have been presented at numerous international festivals and conferences.
<http://www.bettinaneuhaus.com>
contact: info@bettinaneuhaus.com

- 1. Erin Manning: <Relationscapes: Movement, art, philosophy>, Camebridge 2009, p.1.
- 2. In case of the body the materials are bones, tissues, skin, organs and the different sensory modalities, the sense for time, space, the imagination ... as outlined in question 1.