

This is a report on what happened in Montpellier 3-13th of November 2015 in the workshop with Jennifer Lacey and Wally Cardona on "The Setup" that I took part in together with the Master programme in choreography at exerce and some other wonderful guests.

Very early on in the workshop we were asked to perform each other's' dances for each other. Jennifer Lacey told us that after being shown traditional dances in Cambodia, they had been asked to perform "their dances". When asked to perform their dances she had performed ballet. Performing my own dances after hearing this made me think about how ballet is different from a lot of dancing I have been busy with during the last years, because it has passed through so many bodies and been appropriated by so many authors that it feels like an everybody's or nobody's dance. I have since earlier a strong interest in dances that I think of as nobody's and have so far thought of them as dances that are not instrumentalized towards expressing subjectivity. Dances that are not made for self-expression. This is expressed by Andree Lepecki as "the unbearable personification of dance, defining and orientating western theatrical dance from its beginnings to a fetishization of the dance's body and personality (his or her "charisma" or "aura") over the a-personal compositional plane of choreography and over a-personal elements in the actualization of dancing."¹ It is somehow strange that a form that is so old and to me feels so strongly connected to conservative ways of thinking, old values and strong hierarchies, still can feel so close to "nobody's".

As the workshop continued I started to think of this aim to dance nobody's dance as a wish to express the expression rather than using a dance to express subjectivity. Maybe (or probably) this is impossible and completely impossible to measure objectively. But there was something about thinking of dance as a thing in itself, thinking in dances rather than in my own dancing that felt both relieving and (physically as well as politically) interesting in neoliberal times and as a body slightly confused about authorship.

The repertory I have learned in school feel somehow and strangely enough harder to appropriate as it feels less built on an negotiated common ground, like ballet as a form or technique, and more as belonging to individual authors. While trying out a practice called "middle of the circle" by Rebecka Stillman some time after leaving Montpellier and the workshop in my own and others' project

¹ <http://www.diaphanes.com/buch/artikel/2125>, *Partaking to Initiating: Leadingfollowing as Dance's (a-personal) Political Singularity*, p. 36, by André Lepecki. From *Dance, Politics & Co-Immunity, Current Perspectives on Politics and Communities in the Arts*, edited by Stefan Hölscher and Gerald Siegmund, Diaphnes, Berlin 2013

Nobody's Dance, we touched upon two ways of thinking about creativity. The first being going "next to", "side by side", "developing" or making a variation, an interpretation. The other possibly being in opposition to, far away from, negating, breaking with, destroying or ignoring what was before. Or maybe this is just a way of categorizing the overarching collective innovation I believe could be called creativity?

I think that the repertory I have been taught rests upon a belief in individual creativity and values novelty and innovation highly. It might therefore prefer to react to something far away from itself, fuse concepts that were not blended before or expand out understanding of what dance can be. It is interesting to me that a form like ballet, that have been so used and misused, can feel so easy and harmless to appropriate. As if ballet agree to creativity as collective, inter- or intrapersonal and ongoing. Performing my dances and using mine and others' dances throughout the week, make me feel like it was exciting to me to consider dances as variations on variations, as covers of covers, as sequels, negations of or next to.

This idea of "my dances" as dances that has passed through my body rather than dances I have made up opened up for other understandings of what "a dance" could be. The properties, the parameters and methods for demarcating a dance appeared more clearly and it was an interesting way of making a hole embodied archive of things more available and conscious. This also made me reflect a lot upon the aspect of time in relationship to training, technique, practice, specificity as well as well as the idea of innovation as collective. This does not mean that individual work is not valuable for me, but it was interesting to consider innovation as a sort of ongoing transformation, a production of variations, responses, conceptual blending and a collective, layered process as well as an individual one. Coming out of dance school it was also very interesting to notice my relationships to material I had performed over a longer time, material I just met and maybe also starting to distinguish my own methods and entrance points, as well as "forbidden grounds". Some felt forbidden because I thought of them as belonging to someone close to me, as so specific or sometimes trademarked that it felt wrong to stay to close to them. Some forbidden grounds felt forbidden because of shame or lack of training, some felt forbidden because of the idea of quality, style and talent that I have been a part of during my education and that makes up the professional field I am in contact with in Stockholm. It also made me very aware of time and habit, in thought patterns as well as movement and how to not be judgemental about it but increase my awareness of the power of repetition and time. It made it very clear to me how conditions and circumstances strongly influence the products, made more tangible the power of patterns and recognition, for better or for worse.

Being asked to perform my dances, and later in the workshop use those dances as material in choreographic compositions and proposals, also directed my thoughts to what have happened when I have been performing or rehearsing a piece for some time. Often smaller parts of a performance get a name and sometimes conscious, sometimes unconscious together with other dances I name and define the properties and parameters for that specific part. It becomes a dance.

Another way of thinking about a dance for me was the ballet variation with a clear beginning and end. The term variation attracts me and makes me think of the term “cover” as it is used in music. As if doing that same Giselle variation could be a bit like making a cover on a famous pop-song. This is interesting to me also in terms of displacement, appropriation and alienation. To make a country-cover of a pop song, or to make a soundtrack out of a Mahler symphony – creation as transformation.

During the workshop with also investigated what collaboration could be and worked together in different roles and time frames. The changing of roles made it very clear to me how strongly conditioned I am to perform the role of the critical, collaborator-dancer. Taking on the role of the initiator, working with two choreographers as dancers, I suddenly saw this role from a completely different perspective. This made me interested in trying out the role that came to be called the “perfect dancer”. The constructed role “perfect dancer” I based on an old school idea about the dancer. It doesn’t say so much but rather removes judgement and engage full on with all available skills, methods, experience to “interpret”, practice or perform the material to the best of her abilities. The perfect dancer is a supporter, is a caretaker of ideas and has many traits that have traditionally been considered female. To be a responsible follower, that does not value initiating and leading higher than following and supporting, has been an undervalued role to me. I think it is very connected to a cultural idea and historical heritage where the artist has been the male individual, the creative genius that has produced artefacts to be sold outside of the home, who has been the author, the owner and the “inspired” maker of stuff. In that sense I found it interesting to reconsider creativity against this, as well as against the old Platonic idea of the artist’s task to imitate or discover rather than create or innovate. Without considering the shadow world I during the workshop felt somehow compelled to consider creativity as (transformed) imitation, as conceptual blending, translation between different media or expression (or transcreation), creativity as a discovery of something or a meeting with something through a media, a form or a format.

More than anything else, I am endlessly thankful for the opportunities to try out things, so show and share things that I would normally not consider ready. To throw it out before I get careful enough to

change my mind. To do it before criticizing it. The greatness of the opportunities to try out things among friends and colleagues before even knowing exactly what they are. To higher the stakes and perform it full out even though almost no time was given to work on it. To allow a process to spill and form multiple products. To share those and then to throw out what was done and keep producing “sequels”, “covers”, “variations” and allow whatever is “published” as in made public to transform until the next time. Being away from home and away from the pressure of performing oneself, not feeling burdened by acting in accordance to whatever image of self I might have had produced up until now, offered a space for all that trying, failing, doing, making that felt more allowing than usual.

Having the opportunity to change roles and engage in creative proposals as a choreographer, outside eye, dramaturge, performer, instigator, collaborator or “perfect dancer” offered great insights into vulnerabilities, potentials, priorities and overlooked pleasures. Engaging with method and format as much as content and performance, reconsidering collaboration and dealing with showing as a mode of working was eye-opening. Showing things to the best of our abilities even though not at all ready generated high quality feedback not only about ideas and propositions but also about my habitual strategies and defense mechanisms. This workshop was a lot about showing as in sharing. Instead of or apart from explaining, analysing and working: throwing it out there and higher the stakes. Something like a very intensive panning for gold. While at the same time reconsidering what gold could be.

I’m very, very thankful for the wonderful two weeks. It was such a great opportunity, so great people, so great teaching, so great surroundings. It is already a very fond memory.

Very best regards,
and with many thanks

Ellen Söderhult