

The Tools to Intervene

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Abstract: Given tools, long-rehearsed procedures and epistemic structures inform our actions, and they choreograph our everyday practices in public spaces. This article asks how choreographic procedures and knowledge of dance can intervene in architectural and urban spheres and modify gendered spatial conditions. By unlearning dominant, exclusive practices of segregation and instead infiltrating the public sphere with private and even intimate moments of feminist care, the accessibility of previously segregated spaces could become porous and allow for sym-poietic choreographies.

Keywords: Feminism; Choreography; Situatedness; Surroundings; Kinesphere; Ecologies; Infrastructure.

Introduction

Recently, the architecture journal *ARCH+* included a quote from the American poet and activist Audre Lorde on the front cover of its issue on feminist spatial practices: »The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house.« (Koch/Anh Linh 2022). Lorde's famous sentence provides an excellent opportunity to consider the complex relationship between architectural thinking and intersectional discourse: The architecturally inspired metaphor directly refers to a design process which shapes modes of inclusion and exclusion, and which itself is based on a complex architecture of knowledge, an assemblage of mutual dependencies and power relations. Trying to explain, and also to intervene in, structures and roots of oppression, makes us aware of how epistemic structures inform each discipline and how difficult it can be to unlearn them.

This article questions the critical power of architectural design processes and their epistemic conditionality, and tries to frame these within a feminist, decolonizing practice from a dance studies perspective. Since Lorde's quote describes no static conditions, but rather dynamic structures, I will conceive of architecture and choreography as two complementary tools – and as practices which, in close interconnection, can help us to think about practices of intervention. In order to achieve this, I will depart from an extended notion of choreography as an organizational tool that could help us to rethink given structures, a tool which is organized around the *choros* as a collective effort to support structures and even change them if necessary. In pursuit of ways to move freely in public places and spaces, this article explores selected approaches to choreography, writing, and urban activism in their potential to challenge the divide between bodies and environments, the private and the public.

Public Spaces and Opening Gestures

Historically, urban architecture in a Western and European tradition has been planned and built for a male public, as have public spaces. Architecture has been influenced by the idea of public space as political space, which was exclusively reserved for (white) men's activities. Private space, on the other hand, was designated for women and slaves (Arendt 1998). Until today, the inhibition of visibility, deprivation, segregation and lack of access contribute

to norms by which gender is inscribed into the public sphere. How can choreography alter the ways in which power is inscribed in architecture?

The »not-yet« is an essential quality of *Choreo-graphy*, which derives from the Greek *choros*, referring to the place of dance, as well as to the round dance itself and as such, to a ritual which is performed to strengthen the community and build a collective memory via its continued performance. Insofar as these choreographies pre-figure and negotiate a future community, they also embody an opening gesture. *Graphein* includes an understanding of scribbling, drawing, writing and designing, which directly refers to dance notation – either as a post-scriptum – to store the transitory movement for the future and reperform it at a later point – or as a prescript, as a tool, which generates new movement – and thus opens up for change. As such, it seems important to break or disturb gendered regimes of visibility and the legacies of a male-coded public space.

Dancers and Choreographies

Choreographers from Merce Cunningham to William Forsythe have defined choreography as the organization of bodies in space and time and further, as the »art of command« (Lepecki 2013: 16), whereas the »task of the dancer« (ibid.) lies in dealing with these given assignments in an unpredictable way, from which productive deviations could unfold. It is precisely the tension between the prescript – the concept, respectively the score, and its interpretations, which at the same time unfold within what John Cage called its »indeterminacy« – what lies in-between and allows for manifold methods of improvisation. The partition of sensible agencies (Rancière 2009) which comes along with this *choreo-graphy*, with the partition of a spatio-temporal arrangement, and which enables or denies access to different sorts of participation and experience is still open to negotiation. Choreography and dance have been caught in this dichotomous and hierarchical relationship for a long time. Hence, the tools to be developed must go beyond the binaries of the conceptual idea and a bodily execution that derives from a classical body-mind divide that is associated with dichotomies such as rational-emotional; strong-weak; male-female coined in ancient Greece, then reinterpreted and revalued by Enlightenment thinkers.

Spheres and Spaces

Choreo-graphy has been redefined as a practice of space-writing (Laban 1991), room-writing (Forsythe 1991) or site-writing (Rendell 2022). From any of these perspectives, space is not imagined as static, but rather as something that emerges from movement. In Rudolf von Laban's *Choreutics*, which in German is subtitled *Grundlagen der Raumharmonielehre des Tanzes* [The Fundamentals of Spatial Harmony in Dance], he describes dance as living architecture (Laban 1991: 13). According to Laban, every movement has its form, and forms would be created simultaneously with and through movement (Laban 1991: 13). As a sort of ensemble of *Spurformen* [tracked shapes], they form this living architecture. Following this notion, there would be no empty space, but space would be constituted by movement. Following Laban, space is conceived of as an overabundance of simultaneously existing possible movements (Laban 1991: 13). This idea demonstrates the potential of movement to create relations and connections in any present environment. The fact that Laban was also trained as an architect may be of particular interest in this context.

One tool, in which choreographic thinking conceptualizes an idea of space and the relational, can be found in Rudolf von Laban's model of the *kinesphere*, which he unveils in his *Choreutics*. The *kinesphere* is the space that surrounds our bodies and always moves along with the dancer, according to the extremities of the body. On the one hand it seems to be a protective shield, on the other, a light, transparent, and permeable sphere connecting us to our surroundings. Therefore, it gives us a complex image in which separation and connectedness are closely linked. The *kinesphere* grows with the dancer's expanding movement and it shrinks with a small-scale movement, hence it seems to breathe like a living organ. With this vitalist image in mind, this conception was widely used in conceptualizing modern dance, and subsequent generations of choreographers and dancers have resorted to it. The conception then found its corresponding notion in architectural thinking, most prominently in the tensegrity structures and geodesic domes of Buckminster Fuller (Maar 2019).

If we disregard the imagination that places the human being at the center, and instead focus on what results from this spherical thinking, we won't just arrive at isolated bubbles, but are perhaps inspired to think about what happens when *kinespheres* meet and overlap. The concept of the relational is based on the idea of movement, which develops from the inside out.

The porous sphere trains our awareness to listen to our environment and also to other people. If we conceive of architectural design processes which develop from the inside out, we may arrive at processes based on emerging unpredictabilities, on participation, and improvisation – a choreographically inspired architecture. Although, at first sight, Laban's approach seems anthropocentric and unfeminist, it seems worthwhile to ask how his idea was used and might contribute to formulate a different relational concept and how such a concept can then provide an alternative perspective within a choreographic way of thinking as a theory of distances, of in-between, and of shared space. How can this knowledge be made useful and how can we think of and *think with* the space surrounding us? How can it be conceptualized as a tool that helps us to develop an understanding of the relational? How can the kinesthetic sensation connect us to our environments and the things that surround us?

Bodies and Situations

The attention to, and heightened awareness of our surroundings, as it is required in dance and which is often described as kinesthetic empathy¹ can be traced to the *kinesphere* as a model for negotiating shared space (Maar 2019). What happens if my *kinesphere* intersects with yours? How do we negotiate common space? How do we perceive the space around us? How do we observe movement? This perception of kinesthetic empathy can also strengthen one's awareness of the ecological surroundings, the mutual dependencies of human and non-human agencies. Their connection, which is always highly mediated and socio-culturally determined, seems to be at the heart of rethinking tools and practices within the realm of architecture and in the urban planning of our public spaces.

In its long history, dance has developed numerous techniques to consider the body as a passageway between different states, as a permeable membrane, or as a medium of changing aggregates. The dancer Oliver Connew addresses this idea of relating to each other as follows:

¹ The idea of kinesthetic empathy or »Choreographing Empathy« is developed by Susan Leigh Foster and Dee Reynolds (borrowing the term kinesthesia from early dance critic John Martin).

»How to relate to one another, how to enjoy one another, how to situate ourselves, individually and collectively, in the world, in relation to the things we care about, how to understand and take charge of our histories, how to have confidence in our difference, how to make space for difference in expectation, desire and need [...]. Through the body we encounter our beliefs, our histories, our biases, our assumptions, our understandings and misunderstandings [...] our individuality is given rare permission to contribute unabashed to something larger than itself, i.e. a relationship – and to share the responsibility of navigating this important task« (Connew 2022).²

On a fundamental level, our situatedness makes us aware of how to connect with our surroundings. It seems logical that this openness to our environment reminds us to focus on the conditions of our specific way of being in the world and on the place from where we depart. In her essay *Situated Knowledges and the Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective*, Donna Haraway emphasizes aspects of an embodied knowledge within the processes of research. Beyond the paradigm of objectivity or supposed neutrality, which has been predominant in the natural sciences, she proposes alternative practices as tools for thinking (Haraway 1988: 187). Haraway develops a strong argument for what she calls »feminist objectivity«, which derives from the conditionality of all scientific – and I would also add, artistic – knowledge, and which considers the underlying epistemic assumptions, the social localization, and the contextual entanglements of the researcher/artist.

This »tool of awareness« may help to explain the general condition of relatedness and embeddedness: There is no mere »object« of knowledge, but the object becomes an actor and agent and no longer serves as a mere plane of projection. Beyond the dominant methodologies of categorizing, organizing, and canonizing, which were largely shaped by the (male-dominated) rational gaze, we could – with Julietta Singh – claim a way of undoing discipline. This would imply »unthinking mastery« (Singh 2017) as a way of thinking-with and becoming-with, and as an urgent call for a transdisciplinary way of working. Haraway's ideas on connectivity can be helpful in designing tools for co-composition. Therefore, it seems helpful to return to dance practices that connect us to our surroundings.

² I would like to thank Oliver Connew for his inspiring ideas during the development of *Terrestrial Transit*, a collaborative work by *cranky bodies a/company*, in 2023.

Falling and Breathing

In *How to Land: Finding Ground in an Unstable World*, dancer and dance scholar Ann Cooper Albright describes how we move through our environments in a society of increasing fear and uncertainty and in the face of numerous crises and broken promises for the future (Albright 2018). She contrasts this state with the reciprocal relationship between gravity and being grounded, which represents an important balance in the face of social, political, and other uncertainties. Gravity and its inherent connection to the earth, as well as falling, disability, and death, are crucial moments in the connections between bodies, their ways of relating, and their knowledge of the environment. In the connections between somatics and politics, categories of gender, race, class, ability, age, sexuality, and religion – in the personal and political sense – become relevant. They determine how we are seen and how we see ourselves. Moments that tend to be associated with a loss of control can bring about particular states, or conditions of decay or failure. Likewise, the loss of control in the face of movement into the unpredictable is associated with a sense of humility in the face of the unknown, the unpredictable, and the unknowable – and can thus be accepted and transformed into a responsive, and not only a reactive strategy, for inspiring new paths and new alliances.

Breathing as a form of »dwelling in the body« means an expansion into the environment, our surroundings, and an expansion of the kinesphere and as such enables a form of worlding. Yet, breathing also makes us aware of the *Inequalities of Life* (Jansa/Noeth 2023) – as evidenced during the Covid pandemic or in the murder of George Floyd. Yet hopefully, these necropolitics (Mbembe 2019) could be partially countered by the ways of connectivity described above, which could help to return to the initial questions of public space as shaped by architecture, movement, and its gendered and racialized conditions.

Public

The transformation of art into life, a demand that emerged in the early avant-garde³ around 1900 and again in the 1960s has triggered questions about the porosity between the personal and the political. Today, there seems to be a

³ In spite of its highly problematic, militarist and modernist background, I use the notion of the avant-garde, just as an indicator of historic time.

renewed interest in similar phenomena and, a shift from activism to artivism. Acts of gathering, coming together, and doing things together are increasingly being regarded as the artwork itself, as evidenced by the Tanzkongress 2019, where cooking and practicing together were identified as being at the center of the artistic event. Similarly, initiatives increasingly mobilize neighborhoods and motivate people to work together on projects like communal gardening at the Tempelhofer Feld and projects that create safe spaces like the queer art collective Coven Berlin. Other initiatives in Berlin, like the PSR collective at Heizhaus (Uferstudios, Wedding) invite artists and neighbors to work with »othered communities«, to meet, learn, play, offer, and participate and thus create new connections through unlikely encounters, they involve artists and non-artists in different communal activities like at Haus der Statistik, or organize educational events on ecological issues like at Floating University. It takes time and enormous effort to establish a solid base for these types of encounters to continue sustainably.

They all turn supposedly private concerns like cooking, caring, and planting etc. into political and public issues and thus confront prevailing conditions and seemingly immobile infrastructures. They act on a small scale to challenge the normativity of our neoliberal society and operate on the level of therapeutic interventions and maintenance.

It is often the case that precarious, small-scale projects contribute to the formation of a valuable ecology within the context of cultural production under neoliberal conditions. However, despite the assertion of continuity and the desire for a more sustainable time regime, these claims remain unheard by cultural politics. Yet, giving and taking time could make an essential contribution to rethinking our tools and practices (von Redecker 2022). For this reason, the not-yet, the yet-to come, the unfinished, the open space or the open score, or the dwelling at the interstices seems so attractive – in choreographic thinking as well as in architecture and urban planning (Heeswijk/Hlavajova/Rakes 2021). Not being oriented toward a final object, not following a totally teleological design practice, but keeping something open is a promise for the future, which calls for improvisation. This way of thinking needs to include the other, which means both the other citizen and the excluded, as well as other, non-human agencies.

Working with Care

In the late 1960s, American artist Mierle Laderman Ukeles wrote her *Manifesto for Maintenance Art*. In the context of the second wave of feminism in the 1960s and 1970s, Ukeles aimed to draw attention to the value of so-called »reproductive labor« at home. Doing housework and working for society were not to be considered separately. In her book *Dirty Theory: Troubling Architecture*, the architectural theorist and philosopher Hélène Frichot points out that the word »maintenance« already includes hands-on labor (the French word for hands is *mains*). She adds that the notion of »maintenance«, as opposed to »care«, fails to acknowledge the emotional ties involved and neglects the rights which should come with the work. Frichot specifically refers to Ukeles's *Touch Sanitation Performance* which took place in 1979 and 1980 across the districts of New York City. Within an ethnographic framework, Ukeles developed a ritual of handshaking, thus thanking the sanitation workers for their inestimable labor (Frichot 2019: 66) which subsequently became visible.

Recently, the global pandemic brought the long-standing inequalities of care to the fore. The symbolic gesture of handshaking did not seem sufficient anymore – if it ever was. With the simple question of who cleans up the park overnight, Elke Krasny addresses the existence of invisible infrastructures that are crucial to our everyday lives and which only become visible when they are missing (Krasny 2021). Similarly, in their *Counter-Planning from the Kitchen*, Silvia Federici and Nicole Cox ask for remuneration for, and recognition of, reproductive labor in global capitalism and the incomplete feminist revolution (Cox/Federici 1975).

Issues of care have recently achieved new validity and attention due to the Covid-19 pandemic and forms of solidarity associated with the Black Lives Matter movement. Questions about how we want to live together, how we can work together in a sustainable way, and how we can manage our precarious ways of living, working conditions, and relationships, are not only present in social debates but also exist on a scale of artistic life practices (Jaeggi 2013).

In her essay *Domestics against Politics*, performance theorist Giulia Palladini proposes connecting aesthetic, social, and educational environments. For her, »organizing and maintaining and inhabiting a house are the basic conditions of the private before the political or the public« (Palladini 2019). She describes the relationship between »domestics and politics« as a »field of struggle and imagination« (ibid.: 107). She finds interventions

in social contexts that are not based on ruptures and radical actions, but instead include a politics of invitation and the inclusion of pedagogical or therapeutic practices in forms of maintenance work, from the perspective of hospitality and care. By no longer considering the public and the private, or even intimate spheres separately, the gendered partition of sensible and political agencies, as Arendt describes them in her *Vita activa* (1958) can be undermined and subverted. The pedagogic or therapeutic practices Palladini mentions can serve as small-scale interventions on a micro-political level.

The *Delusions of Care* must, however, also be taken into account, as Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung has shown (Ndikung 2021). For instance, when »care« is used to hide dependencies from paternalistic power relations or when it degenerates into simple good intentions or a kind of alibi character.

Site-Writing and Practicing Movement

What would a feminist spatial practice look like if we were to move beyond the traditional instruments of a visual culture of rational distance? What could its tools of intervention be?

The architectural historian and cultural theorist Jane Rendell proposes and develops site-writing as a practice that comes close to what can be called choreographic thinking in urban contexts: »Drawing out the spatial qualities of these interactions between writers and readers on the one hand, places, artefacts, and texts on the other, includes sites – material, political and conceptual – as well as those remembered, dreamed and imagined.« (Rendell 2022a). The relations between different sites and their material agencies feed into processes of negotiating space, out of which emerges a connectedness between those who inscribe their activities in specific sites and those who try to decipher and appropriate them according to their own perspectives. From those they weave a dense tissue of entangled herstories⁴ that can tell how we are choreographed and how we relate to the given scores each singular site proposes. Furthermore, Rendell conceives site-writing as:

⁴ The term herstory, instead of history, emphasises a history told from a feminist perspective and her point of view; it criticises the conventional modes of historiography that gives way to those who »own« history, and also opens up to alternative ways of storytelling, of oral histories, to other ways of archiving and reorganizing the canon.

»a critical and ethical spatial practice that explores what happens when discussions concerning situatedness and site-specificity enter the writing of criticism, history and theory, and writers reflect on their own subject positions in relation to their particular objects and fields of study, and on how their writing can engage materially with their sites of inquiry and audiences« (Rendell 2022b).

Between subjects and site, these writers rehearse and test practices of listening and of collecting memories and materials. A site not only enables us to take a deep dive into the specific context and its history, it can also facilitate a methodological shift. Site-writing can help to reconfigure the constellations between different ways of writing, between disciplines and act in a transdisciplinary mode between spatial theories, poetics, and practices.

Regarding the close relation between choreography, dancing, and writing, I want to quote Sabine Zahn's project *Into Dwelling* as an example. It arose out of her own movement practice and explores urban spaces by moving through them. It is concerned with the transformation of these living spaces. The moving body is the point of departure for an urban practice as a sensual and meaningful entity, and as a creative force that is accessible to everyone. By combining everyday embodied knowledge and various choreographic practices, areas of possible action in and with the city are explored. This practice's primary aim is not to create an alternative narrative about the city, but rather intends to create access to materials, situations, and places by means of subtle physical attention. Therefore, it questions how the city is *made* through immaterial and embodied practices:

»Equipped with an audio-set I start my walk in a surrounding part of the city. The voice tells me to listen carefully, to touch, to smell, to see and move differently – it draws my attention to certain details and at the same moment it leaves place and time for my own experiences. I am slowing down, I linger around a certain aspect of a before unnoticed detail, that feeds my thoughts and lets them spread. My experience, my sensations and feelings are supplemented by my imagination, which necessarily fills not only the voids in this slowly unfolding story. [...] Some episodes are close to the herstories of the given urban environment, its architecture, its history, its neighborhoods, some give more space to the little improvised encounters. But what exactly is the ›context‹? Moving along, the headphones shield me from the outside world and connect me to it in a different way. In an unspectacular way, very

diverse elements of neighborhoods meet here. They draw my attention to the infrastructural mechanics of the city and its public life. *Into Dwelling* deals with making myself comfortable, to inhabit the city, it asks what can I do privately in a public sphere? The term »doing the city« appeared in the processes of *Into Dwelling* – »Doing refers to the present and somehow to a small-scale dimension of immediate action. It inhabits the future only as far as it actualizes the potential of action and perception in the present being present. Doing has to do with continuity and repetition, with transforming in a continuous and almost implicit way« (Zahn/Verjat 2020/21: 110).

Walking, Writing, and Sym-poietic Choreographies

While I am walking and listening to the voice in the audio-guide, my attention is drawn to the ways in which my body and mind experience and sense the public sphere, which is properly oriented and designed for visibility. By focusing on the acts of listening and the different tasks and exercises, my senses are awakened: The public space is infiltrated by intimate moments of listening to a pre-recorded sound, connecting to the materiality of a plant, touching the surface of a wall, or following a spoken score for a small dance in the corner of a building. It is about relating our imagination to the given matters of the everyday and creating an alternative reality out of this quite profane urban environment. Everyone is leaving traces and urban spaces are filled with little inappropriate choreographies which subvert any kind of functionalist purpose and as such, also undermine the given historical context. Within these walls the fictional moments infiltrate the political with the private and open up to the not-yet.

Site-writing in the way that Jane Rendell proposes, and Sabine Zahn explores, is not just a writing practice in its proper sense. Rather, in the practice of walking, a variety of approaches between storytelling, different artistic practices, architectural and urban theory, image and text merge. How to write, how to tell narratives or entangled herstories, also implies the fundamental question of who has the right to write and to speak.

In their work, the personal is closely entangled with the auto-fictional, where personal and academic writing merge in the style of Donna Haraway's idea of sym-poiesis – as a becoming-with. This speculative quality as a tool of thinking-with in a sym-poietic manner recalls what she also describes as »tentacular thinking« – which allows for manifold transdisciplinary cross references (Haraway 2016). Within those methodological tactics we might

find some of the tools with which to intervene. For the discipline of architecture, this could mean integrating choreographic thinking in the way that the body is not only addressed as a matter of scale and as a phenomenological seismographer, but in its resistances and its *kinespheric* agency, or as dance scholar André Lepecki describes it in his essay *Choreopolice* and *Choreopolitics*:

»choreographic planning is crucial because, the political is not a given to the subject, it is not even a given of the human species. Rather, it is a social and personal force and a promise that must be built with others, must be set into relation, and must be dared, collectively, into existence. Once in existence, it has to be learned, sustained, and experimented with. Again and again.« (Lepecki 2013: 22)

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