“We know more than we can tell”
Reflections on Dance Practice as Research

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Introduction

When I dance

    I don’t want you to come up with images or metaphors or stories…

    I don’t want you to analyze the emotion or mood or impression you get…

    At least, not yet.

According to Delia Thompson of The Communication Academy: “55% of communication is conveyed by the body language we use, i.e. use of eye contact, gestures and facial expressions. 38% is conveyed in the voice, its quality, use of tone and inflections. Only 7% is conveyed in the words we use.” Thus, our ability to articulate and receive knowledge via our bodies is essential to functioning within society. Our bodies are, or for the sake of effective communication should be, both our primary means of perceiving and producing knowledge - a process integral to research. When we “research” with our bodies, in dance or everyday life, how does this meaning-making process relate to other ways of knowing? Does kinesthetic perception necessarily require decoding by the brain into language to attain meaning? What is lost in translation? Through contemporary dance, I deepen my capacity to dialogue in the world via my body. I want to access the 55% of meaning expressed in body language that relates to, but does not come from and cannot be adequately translated into words. I recognize the intelligence and complexity of physical expression, which often eludes or contradicts verbal communication. I
choose to pay attention to how I, and others around me, perform their knowledge and identities through action.

To read these performances of corporeality in dance or everyday life, a holistic investment by all of the senses is imperative. In Western culture the overwhelming emphasis on visual and rational perception tends to distance individuals from the world and people around them, through an objectifying or *Cartesian gaze*. In dance, this creates a gap between the performer and audience. As explained by Jana Parviainen in her book *Bodies Moving and Moved*: “The Cartesian mechanical eye observes the world outside, not involved in any place and time but existing as the disembodied mind. In the position of the absolute spectator, the Cartesian subject detaches things and other human beings, even the body, from himself/herself, scrutinizing them as exterior objects” (20). When the body is looked at as an object, its perceived potential for constructing and expressing knowledge tends to be oversimplified. This is obvious in guides to reading body language - experts inform us that people lean towards things they like, and away from things that make them uncomfortable; when people cross their arms, it is a defensive gesture; a firm handshake connotes confidence - these are important markers in communication. But what about when the movement becomes more complex, and this cheat sheet is no longer relevant? What about when you encounter a way of moving that you have never seen before – for example in another culture, or in a contemporary dance show? How do you react to this? If you can’t articulate its meaning in words, or identify a quantifiable outcome of the experience, is it still of value to you? What exactly is the nature and significance of the knowledge that emerges from dance research?
**Dance As Research**

When I dance

I want you to listen with your body.

I want to speak directly to your kinesthetic perception.

And I want this sharing of embodied knowledge to be recognized and valued in and of itself, with no translation required.

In his book *The Opening of Vision*, Philosopher David Michael Levin states:

According to the paradigm imposed by our patriarchal tradition, ‘knowledge’ must be disinterested and dispassionate, a product of value-free inquiry. The patriarchal pursuit of ‘knowledge’ requires the pure objectivity of a disengaged, unmoved observer. The patriarchal ideal of ‘knowledge’ excludes or overcomes its relationship to our sensibility, even if it originates in sensation, in the ‘passivity’ of ‘receptivity’ of sensuous awareness, it must detach itself, must abstract itself, from the body of felt experience…. (287)

Cultural Cartesianism dominates Western forms of research and analysis, placing value on empirical, objective and quantitative understanding as well as theory over practice. Dance on the other hand, embraces experiential, subjective and qualitative ways of knowing. It relies on the knowledge of the *phenomenal*, or lived body rather than the objective body. Dance responds to the question: “What is the body as experienced? Each time we use language to answer this question, we construct the body according to the metaphysics implicit in language, for instance, in the terms of it as the mechanism of a biological organism. The living body as experienced is far from definite” (Parviainen 33). Dance holds the potential to access a depth of experience and knowledge in the body that cannot be articulated in any other form. Regarding the unique nature of research in the creative arts, Paul Carter writes:
When research is synonymous with problem-solving and crisis-management, criteria of success are simplification, resolution, closure. In the process of conducting research, new “problems” emerge; but these are treated in the same way. Within this model it is self-evident that a research question without a simple answer is not a proper subject for research. In contrast with these weak forms of collaboration, creative research, respecting the materiality of thought – its localization in the act of invention – has a different object. It studies complexity and it defends complex systems of communication against over-simplification. It explores the irreducible heterogeneity of cultural identity, the always unfinished process of making and remaking ourselves through our symbolic forms. (18)

In the unique expression of knowledge in dance I find space for contradiction and ambiguity, which is reflective of my lived reality. I do not create dances “about something” that could be translated into words or any other form, for as Marshall McLuhan said: “The medium is the message” (7).

**Embodied Reading**

In considering the body itself as a site of knowledge, memory and research from which all perception emerges, I turn to the philosophical movement known as Phenomenology. The [Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy](https://plato.stanford.edu/) defines Phenomenology broadly as “the study of structures of consciousness as experienced from the first-person point of view” (2009). In his book *Phenomenology of Perception*, philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty identifies the integral role of *prethematic* and *prereflexive* comprehension, whereby we acquire understanding and skills through sensory experience and practice before we are able to theorize about what we have learned. He argues that this bank of embodied knowledge is the base from which all intellectual and abstract thought emerges (xi). Philosopher Michael Polanyi furthers this line of thought in his assertion: “*we know more than we can tell*”, identifying what he calls “tacit knowledge” (4). Polanyi describes tacit knowledge as underlying all attitudes, behavior and language, often on an
unconscious or unperceivable level. Tacit knowledge accumulates in our bodies over time, building body memory. From this embodied episteme, we come to understand others, and the meaning of their gestures and postures, through a familiarity and reference to our past embodied experience. Parviainen explains how this corporeal exchange is facilitated through the concept of the social body. She asserts:

We live in a social world, we inhabit this world, but the world also inhabits us. This means that as the gestures, postures and bodily attitudes of others gradually inhabit my own body, shaping me, I am absorbing cultural values and values in society through my body and in my body. I share a uniform, gendered social body with others. Obviously the rules, i.e. the behavior, of the social body, as gestures and attitudes, are rarely reflected on, because they are not necessarily conceptualized but rather lived in the body. (27)

This is not to say that we can only relate to movements that we have experienced directly, because “…even the customs of an unfamiliar culture may appeal to us, for we notice they carry a meaning, although we cannot locate it in any familiar ‘vocabulary’. There is a ‘cultural intersubjectivity’ which makes possible mutual understanding concerning the body’s movements and gestures in a certain community” (Parviainen 70). In contemporary dance, where movements and gestures continually evolve, tacit knowledge and body memory are essential to the performer-audience exchange.

Mark Johnson expands on the significance of tacit knowing and bodily perception as the source of all intellectual understanding and theory in his book The Meaning of the Body. Using the idea of “conceptual metaphor”, he outlines how our comprehension of all words and language is linked back to lived experience:

Pragmatism’s principle of continuity claims that abstract thought is not disembodied; rather, it must arise from our sensorimotor capacities and is constrained by the nature of our bodies, brains, and environments. From an
evolutionary perspective, this means that we have not developed two separate logical and inferential systems, one for our bodily experiences and one for our abstract concepts and reasoning (as a pure logic). Instead, the logic of our bodily experience provides all the logic we need in order to perform every rational inference, even with the most abstract concepts. (179)

Thus, our bodies, as living, breathing, sensing subjects, are the primary means by which we form all understanding - intellectual, conceptual or otherwise – in order to read the people and world around us.

**Embodied Writing**

In choreography I do not construct a representation of identity, experience or emotion, but rather a space in which it can emerge and transform with each performance. I see the body as a storehouse of *prethematic* knowledge and memory of an individual’s life as well as generations past, which can be accessed and articulated only through movement. Over time, traces of experience sediment in the body, partially shaping our identities. In dance, the exploration of personal and subjective corporealities is significant, for as philosopher David Michael Levin points out:

…cultural gestures echo from one generation to another, passing on the life of a culture with the transpersonal body, a living body of cultural tradition. We are not just individual bodies, private, personal bodies; there have never been any monadic bodies, the human body belongs to history, to culture, and the individual body, rooted into the transpersonal. A body belongs to its ancestors as much as to its contemporaries. This transpersonal embodiment offers a vessel wherein bodily knowledge of the different activities of cultural life is passed from one generation to the next. (Parviainen 74)

In dance techniques, improvisation, composition and performance, I write my ever-changing personal identity as it relates to my familial, social and cultural reality. In this complex, layered
and never-ending process, I question what values and influences shade my performance of identity, be they from lived experience, popular media or training in codified dance techniques. As emphasized by Parviainen: “A long-term training and body techniques shape, not only the appearance of the body, but a person’s habitual body memory, body schema, and even worldview. Thus the consequences of the body techniques are more fundamental than aesthetic; they also project existence” (59).

Philosopher Michel Foucault refers to these identifiable, outer forces that act on the surface of the body through practice and repetition, *disciplinary* forms of power (Nealson 26). Further, he observes a shift in the nature of bodily control from disciplinary, external forces to *biopower* wherein an individual internalizes mechanisms of control, coming to perceive and present their own body in a way that serves an overarching or “panoptic” ideology (Nealson 45). Foucault observes of biopower that: “Power, in this modern form, has a particular locus in the body, not primarily limiting or restricting bodies, but through micro-processes of social interchange that direct the body’s energies towards production, including the production of power” (Allen & Young 6). In her book *Anna Halprin: Experience As Dance*, Janice Ross explains how choreographer Anna Halprin tackled the reality of biopower in her piece “Lunch”, in which a group of dancers “performed” eating in slow motion at a formal luncheon event. According to Ross: “*Lunch* exaggerated the internalized constraints that rule us in as common a practice as eating, and in this way brings out important nuances about the lines between our public and private lives and civility and the cultural control of appetites. Through table manners we see how rules of consumption get remembered in the body” (264). I am similarly concerned with how external and internalized cultural forces accumulate and manifest in the body over time.
However, this is not to conclude that bodies are entirely socially and culturally formed. “The body-self cannot fight back if its identity is nothing but a product of social control. There is a need for a conception of the body as rooted in the body of felt experience: an intelligent body capable of self-reflection, a body capable of articulating its motives and reasons for action” (Parviainen 27). Perhaps a critical performance of identity could be understood as the interaction between internal impulse, external stimuli and audience reception, in which “the ‘truth’ of the bodily expression is manipulated, cited and rewritten by the performer” (Kuppers 56). The potential of dance to contribute to critical performances of identity hinges largely on dance pedagogues to facilitate authentic over adaptive behavior. As described by Ross, “Instead of teaching a movement technique, both H’Doubler and Ann [Halprin] encouraged a physical unpeeling of the body’s habitual responses until one reached a core truth” (31). Practices such as Authentic Movement, Action Theatre, and Theatre of the Oppressed also aspire to access a critical writing of the body.

**The Space Between: From Practice to Theory**

Regardless of how critical or aware an artist is of the ways in which they write their body, the “truth” of a bodily expression is never singular or static. The way that I experience my identity through movement can never be totally explicit or apparent to another person – there exists a gap between movements as experienced and their visual appearance – between moving and moved (Parviainen 66). Ross describes one such situation for the young Halprin, presenting her first-ever choreography in her high school, which “…had flopped because as often happens with young choreographers, it may have been more felt by her than communicated to the audience” (22). Later in her career, Halprin “began probing…not just what the intended meaning
of the specific gestures were, but what the unanticipated patterns of their actions or poses might suggest when looked at from the outside vantage point of the audience” (Ross 56). In order for dance to truly touch an audience member, it needs to reach beyond visual perception and tap into a plurality of senses, calling on body memories of lived experience. The symbiotic performer-audience relationship relies on the body awareness of both parties. “There is reversibility between consciousness of one’s own body and perception of the other” (Parviainen 72).

As such, participation in contemporary dance is key to its comprehension and accessibility. As asserted by dance artist and pedagogue Susan Stinson: “…the arts should seek to hold a balance between receiving cultural production and participating in cultural production. Both are valid. Both communicate knowledge, understanding and values, but the participation is more significant then the reception, short and long term” (131). An immense amount of the knowledge I gain in dance is present in the process, rather than in the product of a given piece. When I present a finished, polished package to an audience, I am only sharing a portion of my research, thus not exemplifying the full potential of dance in the production of knowledge.

Carter reinforces this sentiment in his statement: “To understand the social value of what we are doing, we need to study the process of creativity, rather than its outcomes” (17). Additionally, I believe that my ability to theorize critically about dance as an audience member stems directly from my practice within the field. Barbara Bolt gives an example of this reality in her discussion of two visual artists: “It is in the special kind of sight that Hockney gained through being a practitioner that enabled him to offer both original and originary approaches and insights into the drawings of Ingres. The specificity of Hockney’s experience as an artist, and particularly a drawer, fashioned the nature of the question, the methodology and the types of realizations that emerged from the investigation” (27). Through practice, we can gain a greater facility to access
and articulate the kinesthetic perceptions that arise from watching dance. As expressed by Bolt, there exists “…a double articulation between theory and practice, whereby theory emerges from a reflexive practice at the same time that practice is informed by theory” (29). Essentially, embodied practices in dance and life are the precursor to all theoretical inquiry.

**Dissolving Dualisms: Diverse Ways of Knowing**

Having asserted the invaluable experiential, subjective and qualitative knowledge that emerges from dance research, I am interested in how this embodied episteme interacts with other ways of knowing and expressing in the world. While I believe that the interplay of diverse ways of knowing is essential to forging new understandings (as well as inevitable), I do not want more culturally dominant disciplines such as linguistics, math or science, to overshadow less prominent methods of exploration in creative arts practices. To this end, I find it paramount that interdisciplinary work not be intended or perceived as a translation of meaning, but rather as an interaction of forms. For me, the play between movement and language is particularly pertinent. I value Bolt’s emphasis on the “…dialogical relation between making and writing” (31), as well as what Annette Iggulden identifies as the “…mutually interactive relationship of words and images with the body” (66). The connections between dance and language were touched on earlier by Mark Johnson with the idea of “conceptual metaphor” and are furthered by Levin in his article “The Poetic Function in Phenomenological Discourse”. Levin writes:

> The experiential meaningfulness of a word arises through its resonance, its bodily felt sense, and can be deepened when our listening really gives it the space, or silence, in which to reverberate and take hold of us. The more deeply phenomenological discourse touches our feeling, the more the meaning of that discourse resonates and echoes; and the more it resonates, or echoes, the more it eludes objective clarity and descriptive precision. Authentic languaging, in fact, can be true only on condition that it opens up
and somehow spans a space for change, movement and growth. But that entails its irreducible ambiguity inasmuch as the phenomenological language must hover freely over the experiential space: the space between where one is at present and where the languaging of that present moves one. (224)

My research in dance and writing has many parallels, as well as points of overlap and divergence. I traverse in the spaces between and within movement and words, to expand and deepen my ways of perceiving, processing and acting in the world.

Currently, I am creating a contemporary dance solo titled “The Muse”, which emerged and is performed in dialogue with E.E. Cummings’ poem “Somewhere I have never traveled, gladly beyond”. Interpreting the imagery and metaphors of Cummings’ love poem as an invocation of his muse, I explore contemporary understandings of the feminine muse in Western culture. Drawing inspiration from Jeffner Allen and Iris Marion Young’s book *The Thinking Muse*, I express the role of the muse as both passive and active. The solo unfolds as a negotiation between the simultaneous assembling and crumbling of shapes, words, and images, evoking a female muse who is not easily pinned as erotic or innocent, young or old, strong or fragile. Far from being a physical representation or explanation of Cummings’ poem, this solo engages the text from my personal perspective. Through dance, I embody how the words relate to my lived experiences in an associative, lateral and emergent construction of knowledge. I experiment with Iggulden’s question: “What happens when colour, gesture, form and an awareness of spaces in and around words, are brought to bear on a system of language meant to reflect a clarity of ideas, order and sense?” (67).

In order to reconcile the often linear, static and objectifying tendencies of English language with the subjective, messy nature of meaning in dance, I deconstruct, recontextualize and reshape language. As words emerge from movement and movement from words in a
cyclical process of meaning-making, the boundaries between experiential vs. empirical; qualitative vs. quantitative; and subjective vs. objective ways of knowing begin to dissolve. I need both dance and language to build understanding. Further, it is in the encounter of dance with language, and practice with theory, that meaning is deepened. Bolt reinforces the importance of the encounter of practice and theory in her article “The Magic is in Handling”, suggesting that “…practice-only post-graduate research can disable practice-led research by confusing practice with praxical knowledge and severing the link between the artwork and work of art” (34). Thus, practice and theory serve one another. Our embodied and rational knowledge develop hand in hand. Through a plurality and intertwining of approaches to research, I expand my comprehension of the world.

So, when I dance

I hope you will trust in the intelligence of the body.

-value your embodied response-

And then, please, move on to describing images or metaphors or stories…

Let these diverse ways of knowing oneself, one another and the world interact, to fully impact change.

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**Works Cited**


