

Performing Ideas . . . Expertly

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Beginnings

This essay has an agenda, or I should say it provides an opportunity to link a number of different agendas that reflect my concern for the role of the arts in society as a whole, but more specifically my ongoing interest in strengthening the position of dance as a valid research enterprise within the context of the modern university. I will examine how such a positioning could take place amid both the real and imagined threats that confront it in today's academic environment. In doing so, I would also like to draw on the work of a number of authors, including Bill Readings (1997) and Susan Melrose (2002, 2009). The primary question here, then, is whether dance is under threat, and if so, where the threats come from and how real they actually are.

I do not claim to have easy answers here, but to say that dance is under threat is to acknowledge a few facts: It is an art form that focuses primarily on the performed movements of the human body. It is one of the youngest disciplines to incorporate itself into the university system and therefore is particularly vulnerable to the inevitable pressures to produce results that justify the economic investment the university makes in it. It also exists within a climate of research that prioritizes scientific and technological development, which generates substantial economic benefits between universities and corporate industries. Since a host of other disciplines can also claim threats from these same forces, to say that dance is particularly under threat could be disputed. What then makes dance special, or especially vulnerable to these perceived threats?

To even begin to answer such questions, I think it is first necessary to do away with simple binaries and the seemingly unresolvable contradictions they raise. I would therefore like to draw on an interesting concept that comes out of the literature on transdisciplinarity. We have heard of interdisciplinarity, multidisciplinarity, and even cross-disciplinarity, but the term transdisciplinarity is less spoken of, particularly within the arts. In his *Manifesto of Transdisciplinarity* (2002), Basarab Nicolescu describes transdisciplinarity as a research mode that brings very different disciplines to the table to solve an issue that goes beyond any of them. Whereas interdisciplinarity goes between and tries to mediate, transdisciplinarity goes across and tries to create new frameworks and solutions to address a wider set of concerns. In claiming that new knowledge emerges at the intersections of existing disciplines rather than strictly within them, transdisciplinary scholar and quantum physicist Nicolescu asks us to revisit the ontological and epistemological bases of our disciplinary practices in the hope of re-establishing connections to areas of knowledge that we might ordinarily neglect. Transdisciplinarity operates under three key axioms. The first is complexity, the second is levels of reality, and the third is the logic of the included middle. The first two essentially acknowledge the complex nature of most contemporary phenomena and the fact that reality is multi-layered. The third, however, is considered a discipline in itself. The logic of the included middle is based on the

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idea that there are different levels of existence or degrees of “being” to any complex phenomenon and that it is possible to navigate between these different levels. As such, it disrupts the kind of binary yes/no, subject/object thinking that creates unnecessary tensions between disciplinary areas, tensions that are often bound up with the competition for available resources that disciplines require to run efficiently. It is therefore quite difficult fully to understand the complex nature of any phenomenon through the lens of a single discipline. A great deal can be missed because of the processing limitations of our normal everyday operating consciousness. In other words, there is only so much that we can grasp of “things” that present themselves to us all at once. I argue, however, that since phenomena are registered by the body’s complex perceptive apparatus all at once, even without our consciously “knowing” it, the information is in us and can be accessed, or “re-cognized,” through a number of expert practices.

Contemporary dance involves training and performing through the agency of a number of different techniques. Dancers are therefore well aware of how much this performative “reaching into themselves” can open personal and collective doorways. Choreographic processes and choreographic works form a kind of superstructure within which knowledge is generated, channelled, and shared between parties. This exchange is, to a great extent, a silent process of “discursive acts” that depend on disciplined “languages of production.” I believe it is with some concern for how these “languages of production” are positioned within departments of drama, theatre and/or performance studies that “The Other ‘D’: Locating ‘D’ance in Drama, Theatre and Performance Studies in Canada” convened the panels that led to this special forum section of *Performance Matters*. I also argue that there is a fundamental misalignment between the theoretical frames that are used to analyze these languages of production and the “languages” themselves—languages which form the basis of expert dance practices, and that are thus responsible for a great deal of the misrepresentations that plague the field. And further, this misalignment arises mainly because these intellectual frames and methodological devices were never designed with dance or embodied practices in mind in the first place. Dance artists and dance scholars should, therefore, be more concerned with devising more appropriate frames that best suit the expert practices the discipline utilizes to produce itself.

I have proposed a number of strategies in the past (Daniel 2009, 2010a, 2010b), and my continuing efforts have concentrated on developing a particular theory of artistry. This begins with a thesis that promotes dance as a physical practice as well as a strategy for what I have termed “re-cognizing” already embodied knowledge (cultural, sociopolitical, biogenetic, and otherwise) that is always already deeply embedded within us. Performance is key to this strategy of “re-cognition.” It is also a means to generate new experiences that “challenge” or “take issue” with that which is already embedded in us. In other words, the body is an investigative “tool” as much as it is a “tool” that investigates itself. It is a complex entity that has the capacity to recursively examine other parts of itself. However, this “self” is fractured and thus incapable of bringing its parts together into a coherent whole without a comprehensive practice. One therefore needs a theory of practice or a theory that is articulated through a specific set of practices, expert performance being one of them.

In his 2010 book *Self Comes to Mind*, neuroscientist and neurologist Antonio Damasio lays out a perspective that allows us to understand how the terrain of our own consciousness can be navigated. He describes some of the results of his research on brain maps as follows:

The distinctive feature of brains such as the one we own is their uncanny ability to create maps. Mapping is essential for sophisticated management, mapping and life management

going hand in hand. When the brain makes maps, it informs itself. . . . Maps are constructed when we interact with objects, such as a person, a machine, a place, from the outside of the brain towards its interior. . . . Maps are also constructed when we recall objects from the inside of our brain's memory banks. The construction of maps never stops even in our sleep, as dreams demonstrate. The human brain maps whatever object sits outside it, whatever action occurs inside it, and all the relationships that objects and actions assume in time and space, relative to each other and to the mother ship known as the organism, sole proprietor of our body, brain, and mind. The human brain is a born cartographer, and the cartography began with the mapping of the body inside which the brain sits. (Damasio 2010, 63–64)

Note that Damasio's maps are abstract representations of the body's entire experiences stored in the cerebral cortices. The information in these maps comes from the body's actions and in turn influences how it behaves. These maps are highly interactive systems that not only operate within the body but extend far beyond the reach of our limbs. It just so happens that their most abstract representations are located in the brain, and that is precisely what they are at that level: abstract representations of experienced phenomena that in turn generate instructions that determine our behaviour. Human beings are thus self-organizing organisms both from without and within.

If these maps contain, as Damasio implies, the history of all our performed actions, then it is logical to assume that our history is embodied in the totality of the body as a complex entity. We must therefore investigate it from both these perspectives if we wish to *know* what we're talking about. Also, since human beings have complex cultural and biological histories developed over extensive periods of time, histories that are deeply entwined with the evolution of organic life on the planet as a whole, it is perhaps also fair to say that we are truly embedded in nature and hence embodied with its secrets. The concept of "re-cognition," therefore, is the body's "conscious" use of its own systems to understand itself, and we need practices, whole body practices, to fully comprehend that knowledge. Thus, if dance is threatened by theatre studies, drama studies, or performance studies departments, or any other "studies" for that matter, it is because the university does not recognize the scope of its value or at best uses it as an accessory to the more institutionalized forms of knowledge or scientific practices that are only interested in furthering their own agendas.

To be clear here, as a scholar I value the different theoretical perspectives and analytical frames that allow me to approach the embodied knowledge I seek to investigate through dance practice. However, I am also fully aware of their limitations. Since the issue of how disciplines, their boundary markers, and the types of strategies, tools, and practices needed to reveal and frame knowledge lies at the heart of this conundrum, I believe that the axioms embedded in a transdisciplinary approach offer some useful solutions. The logic of the included middle proposes the existence of a dynamic field generated between opposites that masks a hidden third principle, which "allows the unification of the transdisciplinary Subject and the transdisciplinary Object while preserving their difference" (Nicolescu 2006, 10). This idea is grounded in the logic that defines the work of quantum mechanics pioneers Max Planck, Wolfgang Pauli, and Werner Heisenberg. Brenner claims that, based on the work of these three physicists, the characteristics of energy can be formalized "as a structural logical principle of dynamic opposition, an antagonist duality inherent in the nature of energy (or its effective quantum field equivalent) and accordingly of all real physical and non-physical phenomena" (Brenner in Magnani et al. 2010, 338). His reasoning follows the original work of Stéphane Lupasco (1900–88), the French-Romanian philosopher who claimed that for every phenomenon, there is an anti-phenomenon such that the actualization of one is the potentialization of the other, without either ever disappearing entirely. The point at which equilibrium occurs is also

the point of maximum antagonism or contradiction and hence the place where the included third term emerges. It is this third term or state that enables the shift to a different level or energetic plane. The key issue here is that the logic of an included middle not only changes the way we see the natural world but also points to our potential to perform in, and hence transform, that world.

Since disciplines are really highly specialized frameworks with detailed investigative methodologies, transdisciplinarity suggests that new knowledge emerges at the intersections of such frameworks rather than strictly within them (Nicolescu 2010). In other words, to understand fully any phenomenon, or to address the problems that exist in any complex system, a different negotiation is needed. One of the strategies of the transdisciplinary approach is to bring teams of specialists together to pool disciplinary resources in order to understand a common phenomenon. Another is to look at a problem from a disciplinary framework sufficiently different from one's own to be able to see it in a completely new light. The principle that underlies the logic of the included middle thus challenges us to be aware of the limitations of our individual disciplines and to look at perspectives from other disciplines that at first may seem to have little or nothing to do with our own. It also cautions that, since there are different kinds of knowledge, methods appropriate to their specific forms are needed. To clarify some of the underlying issues and to help readers understand the nature of the perceived threats that exist for dance within the context of the modern research university, I would like to look briefly at some of the structures currently in place that frame our understanding of the art form, how those structures are perceived by us and by others, and why certain misunderstandings and downright fallacies continue to shape the field.

Fallacy 1—*The MFA is the terminal degree for artists working in academia.*

This statement has huge implications for how the discipline and its value as a research enterprise are perceived. Does it imply that the limits of an artistic practice-as-research enterprise end at the MFA level? And does it also mean that if an artist has, or attempts to pursue an MA and/or a PhD in the field, they are now in a different relationship to that practice, which shifts to modes of intellectual speculation about said practice? And, further, if a scholar has no first-hand experience of such practices, does that mean they are still a more valuable—or employable—resource within the modern research university? These questions merely add to the issues introduced by Melrose in her essay “Entertaining Other Options . . . Restaging Theory in the Age of Practice as Research” (2009), where she questions existing methods for identifying the expert knowledge-practices, their operations and boundary-markers, within work that is required to be challenging, innovative, and to offer new insights. She also poignantly questions the role that a certain form of writing is designed to play in such circumstances, namely, the type that one finds in most departments offering various “studies” in dance, theatre, and/or performance.

To problematize the situation further, I would like to relocate the argument within the context of a recent ad for a position in dance at a prominent private North American university. This institution put out a call for “an outstanding dance researcher and artist practitioner” for the position of Professor of the Practice. A PhD or MFA candidate was required “to teach undergraduate and graduate courses in all levels of corporeal practice and theory, dance making, live art and/or dance technology,” with other responsibilities that contribute to “ongoing projects in dance as a researcher and administrator,” while maintaining “an international profile as an artist/researcher” and committing to “developing and directing a new, cutting-edge MFA program in Live Art and Embodied Practice alongside the current faculty.”

First of all, I was extremely curious about the term “Professor of the Practice,” of which I had no prior personal experience. Some initial queries revealed that it was a position that supposedly gave the candidate all the benefits of a permanent position, but was untenured. Knowing firsthand the profound differences that exist between a tenured and a non-tenured position, especially in terms of academic status, economic remuneration, access to research funds, and a host of other issues, I was somewhat baffled and concluded that this must be: 1) a rather blatant attempt by this institution to exploit the ambiguities and uncertainties that exist in the field; 2) the perpetuation of a traditional bias within academia that says artists or artist/scholars are still not at the same level as other academics and hence do not deserve tenured or tenure-track positions; or 3) this particular institution has obviously not caught up with or simply refuses to acknowledge the immense changes that have taken place in the production of knowledge within and through the arts to date.

I could, of course, be exaggerating the issue, but in my opinion, this is where Readings’s statements about the relations between the institutions of teaching, research, and administration ring true. I see an exploitative institutional infrastructure that does not recognize the value of the individual required to occupy such a post or the equal status that research in the arts needs for its mandate to be fulfilled. Even as this “premier” institution claims to situate art making as an intrinsic part of its knowledge culture, it refuses to give it equal status to do so. Here, the term “Professor of the Practice” is used not only as a boundary marker that prevents access to tenure, but also as a tool that the Academy’s administrative machinery uses to exploit existing ambiguities, deficiencies, and contradictions within its own mandate.

Fallacy 2—*The performing arts sit a step below the social sciences and humanities, which sit at least a few steps below the “hard” or “real” sciences.*

This is, of course, a widely held view that has persisted throughout the history of Western civilization and which condemns any form of body-centred practice to the margins of serious scholarship. The body has always been considered suspect, something to be controlled, subjected to rational thought. In short, it cannot be the source of any “real” knowledge. This kind of thinking not only diminishes the role of body-centred practices within the intellectual framework of the academy but also denies how these practices function as part of a complex system capable of consciously knowing itself. Ian McNeely is a professor of history who is keenly aware of the importance of Readings’s critique of the modern university, as well as the importance given to curriculum development in his job as Associate Dean in the College of Arts and Sciences at Oregon University; McNeely gives his individual voice to the issues in his essay “Current Trends in Knowledge Production: An Historical-Institutional Analysis” (2009). McNeely claims that, of the six institutions that have produced, reproduced, and redefined knowledge over the past 2,300 years in the West—1) the library, 2) the monastery, 3) the university, 4) the republic of letters, 5) the disciplines, and 6) the laboratory—none has prioritized the practices of embodied knowing that we have come to charge the performing arts disciplines with offering.

McNeely argues that it is the laboratory that has taken the lead in the new knowledge economy. Interestingly, however, over the last two decades, we have come to see a subtle shift in thinking of the idea of the laboratory, not merely as a place where science conducts its fundamental empirical research but also as a space where performing artists carry out equally important investigative research on the relationship between art, science, philosophy, and the nature of the “self” in performance. This, I argue, has only become possible because of the labour done by those directly working in the field, and which some universities have sensed can be extremely valuable in their attempts to offer a more comprehensive education to today’s students. The fact is, however, that

there is still a great deal of contention regarding the relationship between “theory” and “practice” and how disciplines should deliver instruction in a comprehensive manner in these areas. There are historical reasons for this, but they need not prevail today.

Both Readings and McNeely agree that some of this history is revealed through the context in which Immanuel Kant’s last work, *Der Streit des Fakultäten* (The conflict [or dispute] between the faculties; [1797] 2005), was written. *Der Streit* dealt with some of these tensions and the problems that were created between the “upper” and “lower” divisions of philosophy over two hundred years ago within the German academic system. McNeely argues that the University of Berlin’s founding in 1810 instituted a fundamental break with the medieval model of the university while setting the terms for how disciplines eventually “colonized” (McNeely’s term) the universities themselves. Contemporary Dutch philosopher/music theorist Henk Borgdorff takes up the same argument in his *The Conflict of the Faculties: Perspectives on Artistic Research and Academia* (2012), where he makes a strong case for artistic disciplines as valid modes of knowledge production, in which their practices “contribute as research to what we know and understand, and in which academia opens its mind to forms of knowledge and understanding that are entwined with artistic practices” (Borgdorff 2012, 3). Mark Franko and Catherine Soussloff’s article “Visual and Performance Studies, A New History of Interdisciplinarity” (2002) outlines a specific case study on precisely how universities manipulate disciplinary boundaries to benefit administrative agendas. After several years of attempting to develop an innovative interdisciplinary PhD program for the Arts Division of the University of California, Santa Cruz in the early 2000s, Franko and Soussloff eventually abandoned their efforts, claiming that their proposal was being used as a placeholder for what they perceived as “a form of instrumentalized interdisciplinarity that would produce only proxies of themselves” (2002, 29–30). Borgdorff’s assessment of this ongoing “conflict” claims that the problem is part of a much larger issue that begins with how the identification of disciplinary subject matter and the subsequent formulation of principles that distinguish one discipline from another leads to exclusionism (2012). He also argues that the difference between artistic research and art is a corollary of the broader question of how art differs from science. He is partly correct in his assessment, but the fact remains that there is an existing hierarchy and that dance as a discipline, together with dance artists, always seems to be at the bottom of it.

Fallacy 3—*Dance is a subset of the performing arts, which includes theatre and drama, and hence can be subsumed under the aegis of performance studies.*

Richard Schechner’s famous pronouncement that everything can be studied *as* performance (Schechner [2002] 2013) has simultaneously befuddled the field and subsumed the methodological frameworks of almost every single discipline under the umbrella of performance studies. I think it’s impossible to find a principle that has colonized intellectual scholarship more comprehensively. We have seen the proliferation of performance studies programs in departments from English to Anthropology, from Drama and Theatre Studies to Media Studies, as well as its incorporation into Communication Studies and across Science and Technology Studies. The trend is so widespread that the possibilities seem endless. This, of course, serves institutional agendas quite well, since it often translates into a more cost-effective alternative to disciplinary individualism, and the subsequent “drain” on resources that expert performance training, including the infrastructure that live performance staging requires.

As an artist and scholar with deep roots in the professional world of dance, theatre, and performance, I am sometimes dumbfounded by how tension-laden are some of our connections between disciplines within the academy as well as with those in the so-called “real world” outside its

walls. For example, at a recent European Colloquium on Artistic Research in Performing Arts, one delegate made what I saw as a thinly disguised “dig” at an “art market” out there that was quite different to what “we” do in academia. This surprised me, given that this same “marketplace” was the source of much un-tenurable expertise that partially sustains those in academia, and which continues to feed the hungry careers of so many scholars. Although such demarcations are not at all helpful, I am also aware of how perceived threats can shrink the scope of possible disciplinary collaborations. Bill Readings argued in 1997 that the two main roles of the university, as a research and teaching institution, have been undermined by a third, administration, where the constant push to “excel” and “innovate” forces us all continually to manufacture new knowledge to remain economically viable and administratively sound within the general marketplace of ideas. I believe he had his hand on the pulse of a phenomenon decades ago that has grown as universities become multinational corporate industries that corner entire sections of certain markets. The fallout is that these administrative juggernauts increasingly sacrifice some of their commitment to teaching and research that is essential to disciplines such as dance.

Will the trend of reorganizing departments and disciplinary boundaries to accommodate prevailing economic policies continue? Is dance under threat? Is that threat coming from our closest disciplinary neighbours? And, most importantly, is it possible to perform dance and choreographic ideas expertly in a climate that is ruled by outmoded and/or unsuitable forms of “intellectualism”? These are crucial questions to consider as we move forward in our quest to make artistic research a valid enterprise within the administrative machinery of the modern research university, which of course means real equity in the allocation of research funds, employment, and a host of other issues which only create roadblocks that maintain an increasingly uncertain hierarchy. I frequently hear complaints in my department about how much more resources dance requires to maintain its core teaching practices, which involve expert studio instructors, music accompanists, performance lab spaces, access to audiences to complete the artistic research process, etc. I also fear that the strategy of not replacing retiring faculty who are also artists in these institutions has become the not-so-silent and ready solution to an extremely delicate problem.

Endings . . . For Now

To conclude, dance will always be under threat in any academic institution that does not value and support the knowledge that is generated through its activities. However, on a more positive note, I am confident in the enormous possibilities for dance research by expert practitioners that I see opening up internationally, particularly in the UK, Australia, and parts of Europe. These successes come from an ability to identify and exploit a number of connections between dance and a wide range of disciplinary areas. My teaching at the graduate and undergraduate levels in both studio and lecture/seminar settings challenges students to explore these possibilities. I work across disciplines and across media, and I collaborate with people who are very far away from my own discipline. To me, this work is deeply choreographic, deeply performative, and deeply human, and most of all it speaks to the idea that we can perform ideas . . . expertly.¹

As a black cisgender artist-scholar who has spent the majority of his artistic and academic life in predominantly white settings, I confess that I see things quite differently than most of my colleagues. The point here is that I am no stranger to the prejudices constituted against disciplines, areas of research, languages of expression, and all the other subtle—and not so subtle—discriminatory practices that are practised both inside and outside academia. Given that many of these biases are

grounded in historically established configurations of inequality and impact on what takes place in the classroom, the boardroom, in adjudication panels where research funding priorities are determined, and in hiring, promotion, and tenure committees where one's performance is being assessed, attempting to subscribe to a paradigm that not only ignores embodied practices as valid modes of knowing but also bodies as sites for the investigation of specific knowledge is quite frankly insane. In the current climate of world politics, where established institutions are literally being torn apart around us day by day, this needs to change. We need the arts and especially expert practitioners of body-centred knowing if we are to survive and fulfil our potential as human beings.

Note

1. To view a selection of my choreographic works, films, writings, and other media from 2003 through 2016, visit <http://www.henrydaniel.ca>.

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