

HYBRID DRAMATURGIES – THREE EXPERIENCES OF DANCING ESSAYS

The COVID-19 pandemic accelerated a process that was already underway: the widespread use of digital media and social networks supported many dance practitioners so that they could continue devoting themselves to their artistic practice and feel connected to a broader dancing community. This text poses two questions: (1) How are these tools affecting artistic and dramaturgical processes in the contemporary dance field? (2) How are dance practitioners using digital media to build new storytelling and narrative experiences? The answers will clarify how the entanglement between digital media and embodied arts is contributing to a new essayistic approach to contemporary performance, deeply affecting the mode of representation of dance.

I will present and compare, based on the post-phenomenological idea of 'affordances' by Peter-Paul Verbeek (2005), three online experiences: the 2020 and 2021 edition of the Berliner A.Part Festival, the DanceMe platform, and the #Share project by the Berliner theatre Acker Stadt Palast.

These online practices represent both open relational spaces and artists' journals. On the one hand, they document the creative and dramaturgical processes of the involved artists. On the other hand, these digital tools support the artists' self-reflection, challenging the principle of Kantian aesthetic empiricism, according to which what counts in the end is only the relationship between the audience and the final artistic product. Here, the artists are foregrounded, while the final work takes place in the background, if not disappearing completely.

DRAMATURGY WITHOUT DRAMATURGS

Before delving deeper into the relationship between essay and dance dramaturgy, it might be useful to provide some insights into how the practice of dance dramaturgy is at work within choreography and contemporary dance. Attempting a definition of dance dramaturgy can be hazardous, for dance dramaturgy is rooted in both the embodied practice of dance practitioners and every single connection – both human and non-human – in which the dance practitioners are immersed. My aim here is to characterise dance's dramaturgical function and to determine which 'principles' (Efrosini Protopapa and Theodoridou, 2003) – rather than which activities – it is based on. Magda Romanska writes the following:

The concept [of dramaturgy] is being refined as we speak, as verb, skill and function, to include many modes of making meaning. . . . The dramaturg is also the ultimate globalist: inter-cultural mediator, information and research manager, media content analyst, interdisciplinary negotiator, social media strategist. The dramaturgical function is one of a mobile and complex nature and it requires a similarly flexible tool in order to be able to be fully grasped and taken into account properly (14, italics added).

As pointed out by Romanska, one main function of dance dramaturgy is helping the dance creative process in 'making meaning'. This can be achieved in many ways, such as the following:

- Focusing on the internal structure of the piece and its relation to the outer world: this is the so-called approach of 'micro' and 'macro dramaturgy' (Van Kerkhoven).
- Reflecting on the *positionality* of the creative process: Who are we creating for? What will the role of the audience(s) be? How does our relationship to the audiences look like?
- Editing the single components of a piece, similarly to a film editor, once we have enough material to create a 'whole'.
- Decentralising the creative process in a constant open dialogue between the choreographer, dramaturg (if any!), dancers and performers, light technicians, musicians, spaces, and technologies.
- Archiving the process: the archival function of dance dramaturgy allows for a constant back and forth, a review, and a genealogical approach to the creative process. Where is the process coming from, and where is it heading?

¹¹For the idea of the 'ball of tinfoil' as dramaturgical imaginary, I am thankful to my supervisor, Ben Spatz.

¹²Why I refer explicitly to a 'human' being will become clear later on in the paper.

In my own vision and practice of dance dramaturgy, I developed the idea of dance dramaturgy as a ball of tinfoil.¹¹ This idea highlights the sense of a less clearly organised field in which many things are stuck at the same time, without precise hierarchical organisation; it can be seen as both a methodological approach and the epistemological and political grounding of a dramaturgical practice devoted to inclusiveness and open-ended processes. The ball of tinfoil takes in all the stimuli presented by the dramaturgical environment and does not perform any synthesis; instead, it tries to hold everything together. Everything remains stuck in a specific space of practice; no manipulation is at work – there is only a slow decanting and the reorganisation of matter.

One major question in contemporary dance dramaturgy relates to the presence of an appointed *dramaturg*, meaning a human being¹² appointed by the production who is devoted to all the functions listed above and more.

After the 2003 publication of Myriam Van Imschoot's "Anxious Dramaturgy" (2003), many following dance dramaturgy studies could not escape the question of whether a dramaturg is necessary for dance. As Van Imschoot almost apodictically stated at the end of her article, 'You don't need a dramaturg to achieve the dramaturgical' (65). This notion was echoed years later by Guy Cools: 'You don't need a dramaturg but any artist, especially in the performing arts, needs a dramaturgical practice or a dramaturgical reflection' (113).

Katherine Profeta also wrote on this topic: 'I recognize "the dramaturgical" as a *shared and dispersed function* . . . especially in the early stages, when all company members are bringing in research, posing and proposing questions, offering structural principles and generative games to be tried out and discarded in turn' (12, italics added).

One interesting development of this 'death-of-the-dramaturg' drift within contemporary dance dramaturgy is Peter Stamer's 'performative dramaturgy' approach. According to Stamer, dramaturgy is an artistic practice that happens together with the choreographic event; therefore, this approach is very distinct from analytical and scientific approaches to dance dramaturgy, which tend to perceive dance and choreography as external objects to be analysed (often within the so-called 'third eye' or 'external eye' setting). 'Performative dramaturgy is both experimental and experiential. It's an art form, not a science' (n. pag). Dramaturgy happens in the immanence of dance practice and does not 'administrate sense that is to be applied from outside the artistic process'; it is 'creative by "a physical doing of form from within"' (ibid, n. pag.). Stamer's vision is also critical regarding the necessary presence of an appointed dramaturg,

the work of dramaturgy being more of a sharing process among bodies than the work of a 'single person from outside "who knows"' (ibid, n. pag).

Patrice Pavis, thinking about the possible future developments of dance dramaturgy, advocates for openness, practice-based approaches, and experimentality. 'The next step... would consist in inventing various dramaturgical exercises which might extract and produce meaning "from inside and outside"' (14).

The following sections highlight how the 'ball of tinfoil' imagery, the 'performative dramaturgy' approach and on-line creative tools are linked to an essayistic attitude towards dance performance and how three projects displaying a digitally mediated and online-shared dramaturgical endeavour can be seen as both essays on dance and dancing essays.

THREE ESSAYISTIC DANCE EXPERIENCES

In recent years, many dance practitioners have started using digital and online tools to create, co-create, share, and archive their dance practices. As mentioned in the introduction, this process was catalysed by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, due to the abrupt demand of social and physical distancing. Online, digitally mediated environments for the practice of dance can be roughly divided into three big areas on a spectrum from (1) mainstream platforms (e.g., major and well-known social networks) to (2) project-based creative formats to (3) niche digital environments and tools (e.g., video annotation platforms).¹³

In this essay, I will focus on project-based creative formats aimed at sharing dance practices and processes. Within the three projects I am going to present, dance practitioners and artists render their choreographic processes through video, texts, speeches, and images, posting steps of their research online, and creating a narrative around their practices. Harmony Bench calls this area of artistic experimentation 'social dance-media', as a Web 2.0 development of dance-media, or dance onscreen, arguing that 'the integration of video into social media platforms has enabled dancers and choreographers to create an internet presence for dance', reasserting 'a social priority for dance, which is to say, they reconfigure dance as a site of social exchange and engagement by providing the

¹³For examples of video annotation platforms, see Motion Notes (<https://motion-notes.di.fct.unl.pt/index/#>), Research Video (<https://researchvideo.zhdk.ch>), and PM2GO (Ex-Piecemaker), which was created by Motion Bank and is currently under revision (<http://motionbank.org/en/event/pm2go-easy-use-video-annotation-tool.html>).

¹⁴ Harmony Bench, 'Screenance 2.0: Social Dance-Media', *Journal of Audience & Reception Studies* 7, no. 2 (2010): 183, 184.

vehicles for sharing and circulating dance'. A vital characteristic of these projects is the following: 'dance should be shared, copied, embodied, manipulated and recirculated rather than preserved for the professional and elite dancer'¹⁴

Here, we recognise an early sign of the essayistic character of such dance projects in the challenge to the common opinion regarding the means of dance, the material conditions of dance, and the places where dance practice takes place. What is at stake here is the upheaval of the idea that dance is taking place within rehearsal spaces, within the four walls of a studio. Online sharing processes, at different levels, represent quite the opposite and attempt to disrupt the studio's black box; the idea underpinning these projects is that dance research and dance creation are taking place first and foremost in the dialogical space of the relation between dance practitioners, audiences, communities, and the worlds they live in.

DANCEME

DanceMe is an internet platform, both desktop and mobile¹⁵, that was initiated in 2011 and has been serving for eleven years now as a digital tool for choreographic creation. This project represents what the sociologist Erving Goffman refers to as a 'frame'¹⁶ – that is, an interactive context, an area of intersubjective expression which is in some way shared by the participants. The frame is not so much an addition to reality, as a *device* that supports reality. The online platform is therefore a creative device that enables the participants to (1) create an external record of their thoughts; (2) pass from the abstract conceptualisation of an idea to its concrete representation; (3) make thoughts and intentions accessible for personal reflection; and (4) provide a medium through which other individuals can interact, negotiate concepts, and develop new ideas.

The platform has several 'virtual rehearsal rooms'¹⁷ where dance practitioners can show short videos related to a specific creative process. Each artist can open multiple rehearsal rooms, with each room pertaining to a specific work, performance, or research topic. Artists who use DanceMe are free to post whatever might be useful to

¹⁵ Desktop www.danceme.eu and mobile on itunes.

¹⁶ Erving Goffman, *Frame Analysis: An Essay on the Organization of Experience* (Harvard: Harvard University Press, 1974).

¹⁷ DanceMe, 'DanceMe UP', <https://www.danceme.eu/dancemeup/> (accessed September 5, 2022).

them, without any specific curatorial restraint or direction. Typical posts include rehearsal videos, dramaturgical notes, behind-the-scenes videos, interviews, and short insights regarding creative processes. Users can relate to the research material through either a comment function or posting their own videos into the artists' studios. With this regard, the "rehearsal studio" is being conceived as an open dramaturgical space, where artists and audiences can meet and share practices.

A.PART FESTIVAL, 2020 AND 2021

A.Part Festival is a Berliner contemporary dance festival organised by ada Studio Berlin and devoted to alumni and students from Berlin's dance education programmes. In spring 2020, the festival had to face the first lockdown in Germany, and the two curators, Diethild Meier and Julek Kreutzer, decided to move the festival online. The curatorial team decided that, instead of showing performances, they would give artists the time and space to share their creative processes. The festival website states the following:

On this blog, the invited artists post content about their pieces in process -- and thus give an indication of how their creative work is influenced, changed, accelerated or decelerated by the current global crisis caused by the Corona pandemic, but not interrupted. This site marks a space in which artistic work is made transparent; in which it is less about the finished product or a final event than about the inner dialogue with a developing idea; in which new formats for rendering visible and for sharing are given a chance. This is also where a digital memory is created, a contemporary document of an exceptional social situation and its impact on an art form (and on the people who practice it). What is performing art without the physical presence of performers and audience?¹⁸

¹⁸ A.Part Festival, 'Dancing Through Times of Physical Distancing', <https://apart-festival.blog/twenty/>.

The festival created a WordPress blog, and each artist had their own digital framework. This experience was repeated in 2021 with a more refined concept: the selected artists were paired up in 'tandems', putting the accent on the dialogical space between them. In 2022, the festival returned to its usual offline dimension

at the same time maintaining the memory of the two previous years: the curatorial team decided to invite a selection of the 2020 and 2021 artists to perform – finally – live.

#SHARE

The Berliner venue Acker Stadt Palast developed this format on YouTube during the first lockdown in Germany. As stated on the project's website: 'In our experimental format #share, artists* share online their working process at Acker Stadt Palast while engaging with their audience before the actual live performance. This format was created during the last lockdown, when all venues were closed, planned productions could not take place live and the contact between artists* and audience had to be reorganized.'¹⁹

¹⁹ Acker Stadt Palast, '#Share', <https://ackerstadtpalast.de/en/share-1> (accessed September 5, 2022).

Being based on the video format, #Share provided the artists with a rehearsal room and with a technical team of video makers. The videos are professionally shot and edited and show fragments of studio rehearsal interspersed with short explanations in which the artist, in front of the camera, talks about their work. At the end of the video, the artist typically throws a question to the audience members, who can type their answers in the comment section. Like DanceMe, this project is still ongoing.

I think it is worth mentioning that in all three projects, the artists are professionally recognised for their work and are being paid for their online contributions in accordance with local, officially recognised labour agreements (LAFT in Germany and the Trade Union for Theatre Workers in Italy). Funding is coming from third parties or public funders, such as the Italian Ministry for Culture and the European Union (for DanceMe) and the Senate of Berlin (for A.Part Festival and #Share).

In the following table, I compare the main features and affordances of the three platforms. There are obviously some common features among the three, such as the emphasis on the video as the main medium and the openness to a hypothetical audience and online communities. However, the technical differences between the three online platforms contribute to the creation of very different dramaturgical endeavours among the involved dance practitioners. In the conclusions that follow, I will delve into these aspects more specifically and try to underline the essayistic character of these three experiments: essays on dance or dancing essays?

AFFORDANCES	A.Part Festival 2020 - 2021	DanceMe	#Share
Webospace	Opensource – WordPress – blog	Proprietary app + web platform	Proprietary YouTube – Google
How wide-spread is the platform?	Niche	Niche	Mainstream
Broadcast model	Tandem one-to-one	Studio one-to-many and many-to-many	Channel one-to-many
Access	Open	Open	Open
Subscription (and level of 'protection' of the artist)	Necessary for commenting (medium)	Necessary for any interaction: commenting and liking videos (high)	Not necessary but possible (low-medium)
Interaction	Through commenting	Through liking, commenting, and posting videos and other content	Through commenting and sharing
Media	Text, video, audio, photo	Video, audio, text as description	Video, text as description
Quality of the videos	Self-made	Self-made	Professionally made
Video dramaturgy	Free – left to the artist	Free – left to the artist	Set by the curatorial team
Setting of the videos	Free – left to the artist	Free – left to the artist	Studio/theatre/ rehearsal space
Shareable content	No	No	Yes
Comments	Yes	Yes	Yes

CONCLUSIONS – ESSAYING THE METAVERSE?

Well engraved and hidden into the folds of the internet, the three projects presented are, to varying extents, forms of resistance. They resist modern-day social networks' hypervelocity and bulimia, which engulf and digest everything in the space of a finger swipe on the screen of a smartphone. DanceMe, #Share, and A.Part ask the visitor to take a leap into unknown online environments while maintaining a meditative approach to performance. This approach opposes the hyperproductivity that many contemporary dance artists are exposed to and forced into by a system that tends towards a commodification of the performance while providing very insecure labour conditions²⁰ (Katharina Pewny calls it 'The Theater of the Precarious'). DanceMe, #Share, and A.Part decide to perform the process without any promise of final results. As mentioned above, we assist at a specific tendency in contemporary dance dramaturgy to challenge the form of the live performance. Within the three described projects, this can be reached by postponing indefinitely the very moment of the live presentation and indulging more and more in the path that leads to the final work. In some cases, such as DanceMe and the A.Part Festival, the final work is not even requested or presented. In this state of uncertainty, the first essayistic traits emerge.

As acknowledged by Jasper Delbecke, the essay form 'has evolved from a literary genre to a series of *practices* that includes photography, film and currently essayistic installations and digital platform' (5, italics added). The above-described digital practices and experiences can be seen as essayistic practices, in their fragmentariness, in their foregrounding the subjective 'I' of the artists, and in their disruption and criticism of a petrified, neoliberal vision of the performing arts. Furthermore, Delbecke asks whether '[i]n times of "copy-paste-ideology", where each individual becomes an editor of

their own life story and can share their personal opinions via Facebook, Twitter, YouTube or Instagram, the essay [can] with its fragmentary, self-reflexive and subjective features still play a critical role' (9). In exploding their creative processes, the dance practitioners on DanceMe, A.Part Festival, and #Share make a specific statement on what dance performance can be and can become, withdrawing it from a canonical 'stage-stalls' dialectic – which can also become a dialectic of power – and setting the performance in a fabulative dialogue with possible audiences. The curatorial team of A.Part Festival states the following:

²⁰There has been an overwhelming élan of the neoliberal political and economic forces that – supported by the superfast development of technology – have spread the modules of unrestrained production and consumption all over the globe. . . . It seems that one of our first tasks is to examine how the economic foundation determines our daily work' (Van Kerkhoven, 'Van de kleine en de grote dramaturgie').

*As many aspects of our work have become sheer impossibilities -- closeness, sweat, breath, physicality, touch, intimacy, contact -- we are setting on the conviction that 'together is always better than alone', on solidarity, team spirit, and curiosity. In times of increased uncertainty, we set out on a journey with no expectation of a fixed outcome, convinced that artistic practice has a value in itself. What more can we ask for than encounters and mutual inspiration? Come and have a look! Wander around, get lost and get inspired.*²¹

How and to what extent these open and hybrid essayistic dramaturgies are pushing the boundaries of the discourse on contemporary choreography is still an open question that interweaves with recent posthuman approaches to performance.²² Still, it is hard to imagine contemporary dramaturgies and choreographic practices that are not “enhanced” through digital tools. These are expanding, unfolding and fragmenting - sometimes indefinitely like a fractal – the artistic trajectories of dance practitioners. Their final destination is unknown.

MAYBE THE “METAVERSE”?

However, as the described practices showed, final outcomes are dissolving in a perpetual state of becoming, or better, as Donna Haraway would say, of 'becoming-with'.²³

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²¹ A.Part Festival, 'A.Part 2021 – Keeping On Dancing Through Times of Physical Distancing', <https://apart-festival.blog/twentyone/>.

²² "In different ways, posthumanist co-creative practices with thingly matter involve the development of conditions for allowing 'things' to happen.", in Christel Stalpaert, Kristof van Baarle, and Laura Karreman. "Performance and Posthumanism: Co-Creation, Response-Ability and Epistemologies." In *Performance and Posthumanism*, edited by Christel Stalpaert, Kristof van Baarle, and Laura Karreman, 24. Cham: Springer International Publishing, 2021. https://doi.org/10.1007/978-3-030-74745-9_1.

²³ [i]f we appreciate the foolishness of human exceptionalism then we know that becoming is always becoming with, in a contact zone where the outcome, where who is in the world, is at stake.' in Donna Haraway, *When Species Meet*, Minneapolis and London: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), 244

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