



Tools Tools Tools

On the use, development and presentation of choreographic tools

By Maayan Danoch

What for?

'Choreographic Resources Lab', a collaboration between Hochschule für Musik und Darstellende Kunst Frankfurt/Main and the 'Motion Bank' project of The Forsythe Company, engaged students of the Master programme Zeitgenössische Tanzpädagogik (MAztp) in study of four recent publications; 'A Choreographer's Score' by Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker and Bojana Cvejić, Steve Paxton's DVD 'Material for the Spine', 'A Choreographer's Handbook' by Jonathan Burrows, and the website on William Forsythe's 'Synchronous Objects for One Flat Thing, reproduced'.

At the center of the lab stood students' proposals for physical exercises, tasks or scores related with the publication each of them chose to work with. The proposals took place simultaneously. Each lasted for approx. 15 min. Some of the proposals were directly extracted from a publication, i.e. a score from Burrows' handbook that deals with the notions of "space" vs. "place" was given to perform. Others were slightly modified, when for example implementing aspects of Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker's choreographic methodology in a composition exercise, and again others were somewhat associatively related, as the digital tools for abstraction from the website 'Synchronous Objects for One Flat Thing, reproduced' became an inspiration for somatic based practice.

Throughout the lab the publications were addressed as "tools", which suggested that making use of them for a certain purpose was the lab's main intention. In the following I would like to question and discuss why these choreographic resources were presented as "tools", what they are supposed to be used for (analysis, documentation or teaching and dissemination) and who is supposed to be using them for which purpose.

Drawing from this terminology and the strong focus on carrying out physical proposals, the lab seemed to suggest that the publications enable the students to teach, or in other words that the publications in this context were considered as tools for teaching as they articulate certain knowledge. However, this kind of consideration may be tricky because it overlooks the position of the teacher as a subject, in this case the students themselves. The danger here is that the teacher/student himself becomes a tool for disseminating already existing knowledge and so is employed to confirm the publication, its author and knowledge it exposes.

The only reasonable explanation for considering the publications as tools is their forms and modes of distribution, through which information becomes more accessible than in the case of a performed choreography or a practice held in the studio (that require one's physical presence). If that was the main aspect to touch upon a lab would have been completely unnecessary to have. It would simply then demonstrate students reading, surfing the net, watching a DVD, or practicing the available exercises and scores at any location across the world. So I believe this was not meant to be the point.

These publications, among others, provide an access to a choreographer's artistic approach, a way of thinking choreography or addressing the body and its capacities by making his or her working process, ideas or methodologies more transparent. So the lab was not about proving the use of the publications for one of the above-mentioned purposes. It was rather addressing the knowledge exposed by the publications and asking how one can relate to it, what one makes of it, and how one can use it. So strictly speaking the publications are not tools but resources, as the title of the lab correctly proposes.

In order to talk about the "how" of using choreographic resources it would have been necessary to make the students become the "stars" of the lab, along with their reflections and questions that came up through their engagement. But during the lab the publications "starred" in four corners of the room with the help of high fashioned technological instruments while the participants were jumping from corner to corner performing one task after another. Instead of being busy with performing myself I would have preferred to hear a reflection about the resources: an insight into ways of interacting with a resource, into the processes implicit procedures and a positioning taken through re-contextualisation within subjective fields of interests. By doing so perhaps more resources could have been included in respect to the students' individual backgrounds and histories. Such a setting and approach would have allowed investigating the definition, development and use of tools.

For whom?

'Motion Bank' project of The Forsythe Company aims to develop ways of making choreographic approaches of selected artists visible and accessible through the digital medium. In the 'Motion Bank Score Release' the choreographers Deborah Hay and William Forsythe, digital artists Florian Jenett and Amin Weber, and project leader Scott DeLahunta, presented the process of creating the on-line digital score of Deborah Hay's 'No Time to Fly' and its results.

The digital score was developed from three adaptations of Hay's solo, created by three performers. 'Motion Bank's team recorded seven performances of each adaptation, and so produced a recorded collection of 21 performances of the choreographic score. This procedure attempted to gather more extensive Documentation on Hay's choreography, as it is not fixed in movement and is realised through creating individual adaptations. Those 21 versions were synchronised and later processed by extracting data on the performers' usage of space, through which spatial pathways and patterns became evident. Besides the performances' videos and the visualised collected data, an animated adaptation of the score by the digital artist, Amin Weber, was created and presented as a part of the digital score.

Does the 'Motion Bank' project aim to provide opportunities for the selected artists involved to reflect on their creative processes and performances? Does it attempt to make essential information on a choreographer's work available to others? Or does it want to promote digital art work inspired by choreography? And more important: Does the project prioritise making choreographic approaches visible in other media? Or does it wish to experiment with digital tools by applying it to choreographic material?

These are some of the questions that came up while following 'Motion Bank' project's presentation. These are "yes or no questions" and I tend to think that 'Motion Bank's team would answer: Yes! to all of them. Their enthusiasm could be acknowledged and appreciated. However, this kind of openness to whatever comes makes it difficult to find the project's red thread and to find an orientation among the different items presented.

Extracting data from a choreographic work and using it to create digital objects seems to be a central working principle for 'Motion Bank'. The extraction of data already served as a main "tool" for the creation of the website 'Synchronous Objects for One Flat Thing, reproduced' website (a prototype for 'Motion Bank' that intended to visualise choreographic ideas). Applied to Hay's choreography it produced different results. It doesn't emphasise the choreographic approach or ideas but rather

exposes spatial patterns that Hay herself wasn't aware of beforehand. So in Hay's case 'Motion Bank' is rather a tool for analysing choreography as a product, a way of gaining statistics on spatial relationships as one parameter of the choreography. However, Hay's choreography doesn't produce a single product and spatial relationships are not its main objective.

Hay's score 'No time to Fly' is in fact a written score in a small booklet, formulated in questions and directives. With the help of this score Hay engages a performer through the precise use of language and thus produces a particular aesthetic. The three solo adaptations of 'No time to Fly' were created by Jeanine Durning, Ros Warby and Juliette Mapp – three performers who are familiar with her work. Each performer received the score and practiced it for three months period.

Hay's choreographic process includes several stages; writing the score, translating and practicing it. These processes are at the core of the work and it would have been interesting – in fact necessary – to touch upon them when trying to transmit her choreographic approach to others. Questions like how the score was created, what pre-knowledge the performers have before start working with it, how the performers translate the text into movement, how their practice looks like, how Hay's language produces a distinguishable aesthetics despite the fact all performers practice independently – all this would have been interesting to deal with.

But instead of going into and digging the process of creation, making it transparent and opening it up for the public, an animated adaptation of the score by the digital artist, Amin Weber, was presented. Unfortunately, his creation process was not elaborated either in the score presentation. But what is the value of his work if we do not learn anything about the criteria, procedures and methods of translation of the score into the digital medium? In my opinion it would have been essential to know how Weber understands Hay's language, methods and concepts, and in which way he allowed those to enter and change his working process.

Here in fact lies the main challenge of the project; establishing modes of translation not by replacing one sign by another, but through studying and analysing modes of creation. Jean-Luc Nancy mentioned at the opening event of the congress, which took place under the theme 'Performing Translations', that every language has a rhythm, has a sense and when one engages in translation one translates not only terms but as well the sense that is produced. That sense lies between terms, between elements and data. It emerges through modes of organisation, through a particular mind-set. It is that sense I would like to trace, that mind-set I would like to access, so I would like to go beyond data.

It would have been important to clarify the project's priorities and to give an insight into its working processes also in order to place its different products in their respective context. With this critique I do not intend to dismiss the effort of analysing choreography with the help of the digital "tools" 'Motion Bank' has developed. In fact I would be very interested to see whether those tools could be utilised further and could thus provide more extensive analysis on, for example, movement's tonus, weight, volume, speed, duration as well as the performer's presence, expression, the color of her voice and so on and so forth. And I would like to know how colors, shapes, lines, their modes of appearing and disappearing etc. are selected in accordance to particular aspects of the choreography. In my opinion a consideration of all these aspects would create a much more precise language. A language that steps away from reduction, that makes visible the complex relations of different parameters in play, and exposes what is not so easily traced or represented, what may tend to escape.