

For the period of 6 months, I engaged in extensive research on the topic of dance reviews. My initial interest was to develop a practice where I restage and perform dance pieces as reenactments based only on the information provided in a dance review. I am excited to share that this research was very fruitful and resulted in a highly effective practice that I intend to continue in the form of a workshop for dance writers and choreographers alike in the future.

Time frame:

January 2023: I started the research focusing on the perspective of writers. As a choreographer myself who was going to respond to their texts, it was important for me to place myself in the position of the dance critic. I was interested in understanding their point of view on their work. What was important for them in their writing? What are the struggles they face in their job and position? This helped me to develop empathy towards the (often lonely) experience of writers whose (almost impossible) job is to critique and report on such a subjective artform as contemporary dance.

I read hundreds of dance reviews and studied the different languages that were used to describe dance and together with my research supervisor Petra Mosbacher-Dix, we analyzed the patterns and “codes” that were used in the reviews.

I also reached out to dance writers for interviews. I met 8 of them on zoom or in person to speak openly about the relationship between the art critic and the artist. To my disappointment, many writers (though all finding this research interesting and important) expressed a hesitation to be interviewed by a choreographer. This was understandable to me when it comes to journalistic integrity, but was alarming to hear that some writers felt this would be a criticism on the way they do their job.

The interviews that I did conduct were eye-opening for me as a choreographer and helped me realize how many false assumptions and misunderstandings exist within the field of art criticism and journalism amongst artists. By speaking and meeting with writers I became much more empathic to the complex reality and multifaceted experience of their important work. For example: how much power the editors have on their articles, can they choose what to write about or not? The backlash they receive on their articles and the ridiculous low paid salaries and job insecurities they have.

February 2023: My next interest was to focus on the perspective of the public reading dance reviews. Luckily, I had the luxury of working at INTER-ACTIONS in Heidelberg that provide artists access to their community program BUILDING-ACTIONS. This program facilitated 5 weekly sessions where I met with community members (nonprofessional dancers) and worked with them on developing exercises that focus on movement translation to words and vice versa. Together with them we experimented with the act of reenacting reviews, starting from singular words to singular sentences to paragraphs and finally to a full review. This exchange proved to be extremely valuable to understand how the public/reader understands text written about movement. As a choreographer myself, based on my expert knowledge, my own views on the texts were limiting and full of assumptions and jumping to conclusions on what the writer might have meant. Working with the general public allowed me to realize this and approach the texts with a more open mind.

March – May 2023: The main part of my research was to attempt the practice of reenacting dance reviews of solo performances. Once a week I chose a review of a solo piece I have

never seen before and knew nothing about (why solo works explained below). I invited a professional dancer to work with me that fit the description of the dancer portrayed in the review. Together we attempted to recreate the work described in the review – translating the text back to movement and performance. With the support of the BUILDING-ACTIONS program, we presented our reenactment performances to the general public to get their feedback on what they saw.

Literal reenactment: I started with approaching the task literally. The rule was, whatever is in the text I must implement into the performance. Whatever is not mentioned in the text, cannot be in the piece. For example – if there was no mention of lighting or costume in the text, then we simply ignored the possibility of what the lighting and costumes might have been. I then used regular working light and rehearsal clothing. If there were no mentions of how scenes transitioned from one to the next, then I “cut” the flow of the performance, the performer “dropped” what they were doing and started the next scene without context to the previous one. What resulted was most often a broken up, empty of content performance. The public felt very disconnected and unengaged from the performance, often expressing that they did not only not understand what they were witnessing but also not understanding why they were there at all.

Conclusion: it is not enough to take the words in a dance review literally. As choreographers we often want the writers to be neutral and just describe the work they saw and not to add their points of view or opinions, but that would only lead to an uninteresting, plain description of the work which would not do the performance or the review much justice or dignity – let alone attempting to promote the art of dance as the writers I spoke with express, they wish to do.

Interpretive reenactment: I then decided to approach the reenactment practice with a more open mind. I asked myself what if I were allow myself to include my own interpretation of the text in the review? This did not eliminate the importance of applying factual information in the text, but merely gave space to “fill in the blanks”. In order to do this, I found that I leaned more on the subtext of the review. What was the atmosphere or energy is the writer insinuating towards in the text? What are the nuances in the text? What is the “vibe”? It was at this point when I realized, I was no longer attempting to recreate the original pieces the review was about. I was rather reenacting the review itself as an art piece of its own, without referring to the original piece it was attempting to critique. This became interesting as it became more of a commentary between the writer and me. Interestingly, the public in this case expressed that they felt more connected to the flow of the work they were watching and developed a curiosity in the origin text. They wanted to know now what was originally written in the review for comparison.

Conclusion: personal interpretation of the text in the review was more inviting for the viewer to be interested in the source of where this is coming from. Meaning, if we are to learn from this, the writer reviewing a dance performance, should include their own interpretation of the performance in order for the readers at home to gain an interest and curiosity in piece addressed. This approach served the purpose of reenactment and translation better but it was still lacking of a message or meaningful experience for the public. It was also for my dancer and I as artists felt still purposeless in the context of why is it valuable to have reviews and critiques on dance performances? The practice had potential

in analyzing and developing curiosity but was still not answering the meta questions of what is it all for?

Inspirational reenactment: Finally, I decided it was worth trying to approach the text in the reviews as inspirational texts. What is the review really talking about or addressing? What questions is it raising? What topics – social, political, historical? What in the writer’s experience of watching a performance and writing about it is valuable for me as a reader? What am I gathering, or learning from this text? What do I find inspiring? Or making me feel or think differently? After answering these questions for myself, I asked what would I as a choreographer make in response? Getting inspired by the text now opened up a world of possibilities for how I can respond. Granted, I still respected the facts and descriptions that appeared in the text from the original works the review was describing. But the “how” it was to be performed was now completely open to my own imagination. What I created was actually a work of my own, that drew inspiration from the review or more accurately, from the experience the writer was sharing in the review of what they went through watching a dance performance. As a choreographer, this was extremely satisfying and felt most like a conversation was now possible between the writer and me rather than only commentary. The feedback from the public as well was fascinating, they still expressed a deep curiosity in the review and the original dance piece the review was addressing, but now they were more interested in reading the review as needed source for deeper understanding and connection to their experience. Almost like they started a book with the second chapter. For context and reference, they absolutely desired to read the review as the inspirational source for the performance I created.

Conclusion: In the previous interpretive reenactment, the viewers expressed interest in the source review. It didn’t mean they felt they had to know what the source was, it was merely a curiosity. When they witnessed the inspirational reenactment, they felt the need to know what the source was. This raises for me now the question, what if the dance critic writing a review of a dance performance were to write their own expressive text inspired by the performance they saw? They should of course still include facts and descriptions but if they venture out into their own imaginary creative writing, perhaps the reader will also develop a need for seeing the source that inspired this writing.

June 2023: I spent my available days in the last month of my research towards reflection and writing of my findings. I asked myself, what now? What do I wish to do with this experience? And how can I make use of my findings in the real world? This results in the following:

Dance writer’s questionnaire:

My experience with interviewing and speaking with dance writers was very profound for me to develop empathy towards their role. I also noticed that my conversations with them felt empowering for them and useful to remind themselves of why they love dance and especially why they love to write about it. I created a 25 part questionnaire for writers of dance for the purpose of self-reflection. This questionnaire is now available for public use.

RE-VIEW Workshop:

The practice I developed during this research revealed very useful exercises, tools, games, and formats for dance authors, choreographers and dancers alike. I wish in the future to

facilitate a Workshop series where I invite choreographers and dancers to reenact reviews and share their reenactments with the writers who wrote them.

The goal of the workshop is:

- To establish empathy in the positions and roles of writers/dance journalists, choreographers and dancers.
- To allow dance writers to refine their practice.
- To allow choreographers to focus in their work on communication to audience.

I wish to facilitate a deeper exchange between choreographers and writers about dance.

Our relationship is inseparable and valuable to sustain and support the development of the art of dance. We need to support each other more in our work and recognize the importance of our collective experience to move forward in a healthy relationship.

Contact with choreographers and writers

During my research, when possible, I reached out to both the writers who wrote the reviews I was reenacting and the choreographers who the reviews were addressing their works. I received very interesting responses from both roles on this practice. Both expressed an interest in the practice and in wishing to see the resulted performance. After sending them the performance video some writers found it confronting to watch and made them vulnerable. Some found it entertaining. Some of the choreographers, on the other hand, expressed confusion in how they felt about seeing their work transformed into something else. Some found it fascinating and revealing. Regardless, all writers and choreographers found it valuable and interesting and were curious to follow up on the research.

Focus on solo work:

The reason I decided to focus on reviews of solo performances was both practical and strategic. Practically, I was not able to afford working with more than one dancer at a time. Strategically, I wanted to start small and not get overwhelmed. This was also a way for me to create a case study as a base. It allowed me to create a template for the practice that I could apply later to group work.

Marco Goecke & Wiebke Hüster

On February 12th 2023, an unfortunate and unacceptable incident occurred at the Hannover Opera House, where director of the Hannover Ballet Marco Goecke attacked the Journalist and dance critic Wiebke Hüster in the foyer of the theater during the intermission of a premiere performance. Goecke confronted Hüster regarding her harsh criticism of his work in her articles and demanded that she does not watch his further performances and requested for her to leave. When Hüster refused, Goecke physically attacked her.

As a consequence, Goecke was removed from his position as artistic director and had his repertoire removed from many programs of dance companies worldwide.

This tragic event brought the topic of art criticism and its boundaries of freedom of speech, artistic freedom and journalistic freedom to the forefront of the dance world discourse and sparked a worldwide discussion. As horrendous and unfortunate of situation that it was, I myself, at the time, was glad to see that not only the discussion was coming to light but that my research now gained national relevance and momentum of attention. This endorsed more willing participation of dance writers and art journalists to talk with me about their roles. It also granted me the luxury of having being interviewed about my research and be

published in newspapers as an example for what actions can be taken regarding this sensitive topic.