

Choreographic Methods in Installation Work: Intersections Between Visual Arts and Dance

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Abstract

Visual arts and dance have been in close connection since the beginning of the twentieth century, a relationship that developed and strengthened in the sixties with the work of Judson Dance Theatre in New York City, USA. Although artists and dancers have collaborated for the last 50 years, few studies address the potential of employing choreographic methods within visual arts processes of making. It is in this context that my research inquires how installation artists may use choreographic strategies in their visual arts practices.

Brad Haseman's (2006) proposition of a new methodological paradigm for research – performative research – is my starting point for a mixed methodology. In my work, I use *performative actions* to investigate choreographic methods – such as improvisation, and real time composition – to produce installation work in site-specific locations. These *performative actions* are intended to act as a form of physical embodied knowledge production (Klein, 2010). Simultaneously, qualitative interviews with visual artists and choreographers provide data to shape and inform the construction of a conceptual framework, informed by a combination of visual arts and dance approaches to composition.

It is expected that my research will offer a methodological approach that explores this new conceptual framework in practice. In this paper, I will introduce the research methodology I am currently developing as part of my doctoral study, and explain how the notions of performative research and embodied knowledge led the development of my installation work so far.

Introduction

In my PhD research project, entitled *Choreography as a visual arts method: devising installation through a choreographic approach*, I investigate territories in between visual arts and dance, using

choreographic methods to create video and performative installations. In this paper, I will focus on one example of my work to introduce my methodology, and explain how the notions of performative research and embodied knowledge inform the development of my installation work.

The term choreography has been historically associated with making dance. Towards the end of the 20th century, dance practitioners started questioning the relationships between movement, dance production, and composition, expanding their framework of action into new territory, through conceptual approaches, materials, and strategies (Performance Research, 2012). This resulted in innovative performance work that considers choreography as an expanded transdisciplinary field, and amplifies the choreographic thinking framework (Performance Research, 2012). In the twenty-first century, choreographers started shifting their attention to human interaction, as we can observe in Tino Sehgal, Xavier Le Roy, and Martin Spangberg's works (Rosenthal, 2010). Stephanie Rosenthal (2010), an international renowned curator, suggests that some installation works denote a choreographic structure allowing for art and dance to merge, as it can be seen in the works of William Forsythe, Bruce Nauman, and Dan Graham in *Move: Choreographing You*, Hayward Gallery, 2010. Choreography provides artists strategies that focus on actions (Rosenthal, 2010), and therefore proposes other forms of engagement with the viewer.

In 'A Manifesto for Performative Research', Brad Haseman argues for a new methodological paradigm for 'all forms of artistic practice' (Haseman, 2006: 9) as an alternative to qualitative and quantitative research: Performative Research. The main distinction between performative research and the traditional two paradigms resides in how the research findings are expressed, via presentational forms as opposed to words or numbers (Haseman, 2006). According to Haseman, those invested in practice-led research are *performative researchers*, a position where practice leads the production of artistic knowledge. In my practice, *actions* drive the research and the work. Creating installations with a choreographic approach requires an element of *performative action* – not dance, not theatre, and not performance – that resembles the rehearsal format traditionally used in dance and theatre. In my projects, I invite performers to work with me in a series of two-hour sessions, where I use improvisation, and real time composition to create the material for the installations. The

provisional term I use to refer to these sessions is *performative actions*. They act as a form of production of physical embodied knowledge (Klein, 2010). Julien Klein (2010), director of the Institute for Artistic Research Berlin, argues that artistic research constitutes *felt, embodied* knowledge. While in ‘What is Artistic Research?’ Klein discusses how knowledge is communicated through experiencing the object of research – the artifact –, in my practice, I consider the process of producing knowledge as an *embodied* process itself. In this context, I take Haseman’s notion of performative researcher a step further: knowledge is embodied not only in how it is presented – the artistic object – but also in how it is produced – the research process. Here, embodied knowledge is experienced through the performer in the moment of producing, and through the viewer, in the moment of showing.

Dancing Doors

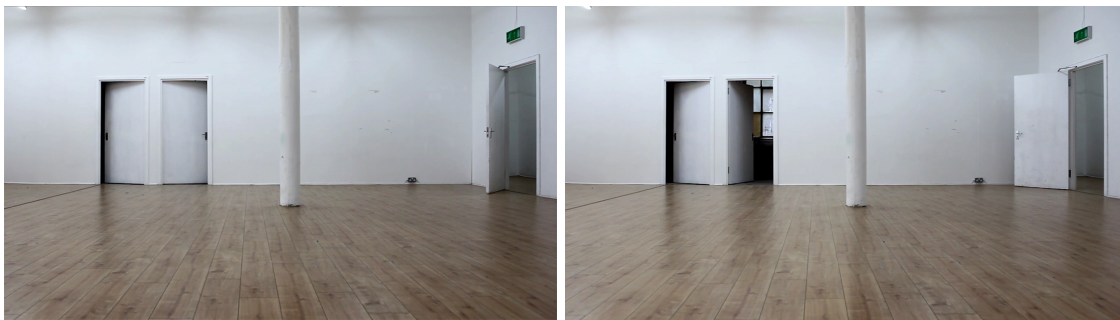


Fig. 1: *Dancing Doors*, performative installation, 2016. Online video: <https://vimeo.com/172874156>

Dancing Doors is a site-specific performative installation with three doors, and three invisible performers, due to be shown on the 10th and 11th August 2016 at The Glasgow School of Art. The performance is to be seen by a particular viewpoint and by one audience member at the time. In the piece, the viewer enters the room from the back and sits in a chair, facing the doors. As the work begins, a performer behind each door opens and closes it. The sound of the three doors closing at different times is loud and echoes in the room, adding drama to the abstract scene that unfolds. *Dancing Doors* was initially conceived as a site-specific video-installation, however, the rhythm of the doors slamming loudly or closing gently requests the viewer to experience the space itself: a site-specific performance without performers. The term performative installation is used as it addresses works that constitute a fusion of event

and artwork, proposing simultaneity of materiality and immateriality, and presence and representation (Nollert, 2003).

This work was created through several *performative actions*. The first session started with a set of exercises designed to get the performer's minds and bodies in a state of presence and awareness, and their physicality responding with clear intentional movement. Then, I marked specific points in the floor – the locations of pause – and instructed the performers to walk, pause in these points, and change direction. They were free to walk at any time, in whichever direction, and enter or leave the camera frame at any moment. Besides the marks in the floor, the score was kept open to allow for playfulness and the unexpected to emerge. Towards the end of the third session I decided to concentrate in the movement of the doors and their potential to create a choreographic abstract composition. I instructed the performers to choose a door, stay behind it, and play with it. A dialogue between doors emerged, a dance without bodies but with a physical live-ness achieved through the invisible action of the performer. As I instructed the performers to play with a door, the work changed. Previously, when they walk in the space, the choreography unfolds in how they respond to one another: for example, if one performer stops, another may stop straight away. With the performers behind the doors unable to see each other – they can only hear – the choreography develops as they respond to the doors' sounds, as the other performers *act* on them. The sound enables them to engage with one another, to be aware of the space itself, creating a choreographic work based on improvisation and real time composition strategies. This requests a different sensorial experience: each performer senses the changes in the space and responds by moving their own door.

During the work's research phase, the sensorial and embodied experience of the performer – *here, now* – provides criteria for the generation of visual output. The presence of the performer, the particular space where we are, the action instructed, and the directing role I undertake, all combined together, enable me to engage in a research process to create material for the work, and generate embodied knowledge. Here, the process of making constitutes the work's inquiry: an embodied process to devise an artwork through choreographic research. Philosophy Professor Mark Johnson proposes a process-orientation conception of knowledge, considering 'knowing as a process of inquiry rather than a final

product' (2010: 145), where the body plays an important role. The enquiry through tacit knowledge that develops during the *performative actions* is the essence of the work, the research itself. The process is therefore both the subject and material for the work. The performance moment where the viewer experiences the work becomes an afterthought, a transposition of embodiment – from the performer to the viewer –, and an attempt to make tangible something that can only be embodied.

In his work *Mapping the Studio I* (2001), American artist Bruce Nauman who often performs for the camera left a camera recording the studio for several hours while he was not there. His studio *performs* for the camera: mice and cats move in the space providing the material for the work. Similarly, in *Dancing Doors*, the architectural elements of the room – the doors – determine the piece and its essence: they *perform*. Invisible performers *activate* the space through the doors' movement, via the *act* in performance: the viewer never sees the performers, except for a leg or arm appearing briefly when the right door is opened. Experiencing the space *perform* is central to the viewing moment, where the material presence of the doors contrasts with the visual absence of the performers and the work itself. The work has no physicality as an artwork outside the event context: once the performance installation is over, it is only accessible through documentation, and the space where it took part is, once again, the same room that it was before being *acted* upon.

Conclusion

As we have seen in the beginning of this paper, the understanding of choreography has expanded over the last decades to encompass other approaches to making. *Dancing Doors* is an example of this. In this work, I use choreographic processes such as improvisation and real time composition to create a performative installation, incorporating choreographic thought in a visual framework. In this context, choreography allows artists to work with performers to explore embodied knowledge, and spatial relationships, in a practice embedded in the interactions between performers. My approach as a performative researcher enables me to value the performer's *actions* to create and present the work, and explore the role of *felt* knowledge in the process. The performer's actions are designed to intervene in the space in a precise way, and therefore foster the development of an embodied experience of

that space: knowledge is embodied by the performer in the process of making, and the viewer when the work is presented. Actions drive the work and the research, allowing artwork to become research, and research to become artwork. Conducting practice-led research through non-traditional forms of knowledge production enables other forms of practice to emerge, expanding further the methods, processes, and interrelations between different fields and practices, questioning the traditional understanding of artistic fields as separate bodies of knowledge. In *Dancing Doors*, the movement of the doors, the sound echoing in the space, and the precisely chosen viewpoint combine to create an embodied experience of the piece. In this paper, I discussed my methodological processes and suggested how choreographic knowledge might be transferable to other art forms in practice, ‘providing a new aesthetic sensibility in the act of creation’ as contemporary choreographer Michael Klien (2007: 1081) advocates.

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