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THESIS

# ALITY

Inhabiting the Virtual through  
Choreographic Practice and Research

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MA ECOLOGY AND CONTEMPORARY PERFORMANCE

**ABSTRACT**

**DATE:**

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<p><i>Ality</i> by two-women-machine-show &amp; Jonathan Bonnici in co-creation with Santi Rieser, Yujin Kim and Lea Paulsen. Performance 16th-18th of February 2018 in Studio 2 at Theatre Academy - University of the Arts Helsinki. The artistic section is produced by the Theatre Academy.</p>			
The final project can be published online. This permission is granted for an unlimited duration.	Yes X No	The abstract of the final project can be published online. This permission is granted for an unlimited duration.	Yes X No

In relation to the traditional expression of the term choreography, the formulation of movement appears to be something that the choreographer as an activating agent sets into motion. In this thesis, I will illustrate a transformation in my own reasoning around that concept and present the three terms choreographer, choreographic object, *Movement as Constant Condition (MCC)* and their reciprocal relationship. Through an evolution of my own research and practice, I will show how I have come to understand that if either choreographic object, choreographer or a prevailing concept of movement change, then the other two must undergo reformulation too. This thesis will show how these variables have become intrinsically connected to each other in my work, with none having more agency or influence over the other.

The argumentation of this paper will use the research and presentations of the collaborative choreographic works of TRANS- (2015) and in particular Ality (2018) as defining models for how the concept of MCC came into fruition, and then transformed my thinking and influenced my approach to choreographing as well. I will start by illustrating how in the work TRANS- we found the seed from which the idea of *MCC* grew. I will then show how it became the starting point for the work Ality. This is where the idea of *Movement as Constant Condition* developed even further through the concept of the virtual and my studies in the Theatre Academy - University of the Arts Helsinki (TeaK) during MA program in Ecology and Contemporary Performance.

**ENTER KEYWORDS HERE**

Choreography, Choreographic Practice, Choreographic Object, Choreographer, Movement as Constant Condition, The Virtual, Ecology, Contemporary Performance



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# 1. INTRODUCTION

## 1.1 Introduction to the subject of this thesis

The subject of this thesis is Ality; a choreographic work which was presented as the practical part of my thesis in the context of Theatre Academy, University of the Arts Helsinki (TeaK) between February 16th and 17th, 2018. The research leading up to this presentation was initiated back in 2016 by myself, my long term collaborator Marie-Louise Stentebjerg (also a Danish choreographer)<sup>1</sup>, the British/French actor and writer Jonathan Bonnici and the British composer and music producer Santi Rieser. Later on the South Korean performance artist Yujin Kim joined the process as well as the Danish textile designer Lea Paulsen. In our shared portfolio we had premiered one previous piece together in 2015 entitled TRANS-. Where TRANS- is the first work we consider Ality (2018) to be the second in a trilogy of interconnected choreographic works. The third work PURGE is currently under development and will premiere in Copenhagen in late spring 2021. The reasons we have for placing the works of TRANS-, Ality and PURGE under the superstructure of a trilogy is not necessarily something that we have articulated in very strong words, nor have we formally introduced this connecting concept to our audiences. We are not working with the type of trilogy format that pre-defines any links or themes or locks a particular trajectory to the artistic process. Rather, it's a softer variation of the concept that we only apply internally in the group to help us trace and think about the possible exchanges and transformations that occur - or might occur in a more speculative sense - through and in between the punctuations of public presentations and the type of conversation that happens in and around the studio.

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<sup>1</sup> Marie-Louise and I have been collaborating since 2009. First in the context of the female choreographer's collective RISK ([www.risk.nu](http://www.risk.nu)) and later on in 2011 we formed the duo two-women-machine-show ([www.twowomenmachineshow.com](http://www.twowomenmachineshow.com)). One year ago (2019) Marie-Louise and I launched The Institute of Interconnected Realities together with Jonathan Bonnici. The three of us have committed to making the institute our artistic priority for the next years to come.

While the main analytic focus in this thesis is Ality, the questions and thought it evokes has to do with the reciprocal relationship between choreographer, choreographic object and movement - particularly in relation to how my own reasoning with those concepts have transformed over time and how they've continued to take on new meanings as I've been writing this text.

To support the reader in following these developments the general introduction to this thesis consists of six contextualizing chapters, which I hope in sum constitute the necessary grounds out of which it becomes possible to enter the practices and concepts that are operative in Ality.

Concretely the first two chapters describe some artistic, institutional and biographical frameworks that have shaped my thinking from when I first started identifying my artistic work as choreography till now. The third chapter offers some thoughts on how this thesis can be read with its insertion of graphical images which accompany the text as a reminder of the non-linear processes that are present here in parallel to the linearly written meaning. There is a chapter that shortly introduces a framework for understanding the notion of choreography and last, but not least, there's the chapter that opens up the work of TRANS- which preceded Ality, because without it Ality would not have manifested at all.

## 1.2 Contextual frameworks

My entry into the field of choreography began when I returned to Denmark in 2007 after six years of training and working as a professional dancer abroad. The discourse that I met when I came back, and which seemed to dominate the Danish dance scene back then, was not one that I could easily relate to as it was still primarily operating under the notion of *modern dance*<sup>2</sup> [moderne dans].

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<sup>2</sup> The term *Modern Dance* was first coined by John Joseph Martin (1893-1985), a dance critic working for the New York Times in the beginning of the 20th century. By this term Martin referred to what he perceived to be a new movement within the field of dance led by a pioneering group of North American and European artists who repudiated what they considered to be the artificial glamour and decadence in ballet. Their work allowed motion to meld with emotion as they tackled topical subjects such as sex, sorrow, seduction and war. It was their depiction that dance should express the pressing issues of its time instead of simply being a medium of entertainment (Au 1988:2002, 119). I would like to add here that the history of modern dance has been undergoing critical re-evaluation the last 10 years as historians are advocating for the inclusion of a greater diversity of artists whose important contributions have been diminished or otherwise misrecognized through time. For further orientation around this topic see e.g. *Rethinking Dance History, Issues and Methodologies* (Morris & Nicholas, 2004:2018).

The independent choreographers who were supported by the Danish Arts Council at this point in time were 20 years older than me. The generational gap alone might explain the difference in approach and aesthetic preferences as their foundational training probably was modern. Another context that shaped modern dance in Denmark is the modern/ballet company Danish Dance Theatre which was established by Randi Patterson, an English/Norwegian choreographer in 1981. Being the biggest company in Denmark with close ties to the Royal Danish Theatre it inhabited (and continues to inhabit) quite a powerful position in terms of resources and in effect its access to a larger audience.

In lack of having a community around me that I could converse with artistically, I co-founded RISK—a collective of Danish dancers that shared my questions regarding the existing context for our art form. We found some relief together by engaging with young artists from other fields of art. As the collective slowly established itself as a unit operating from an interdisciplinary framework, we felt a growing need to define how our understanding of dance was different from what we otherwise saw represented in the mainstream media and on stages around the country at that time. On one particular evening when we were all working on individual applications for the Danish Arts Council we fell once again into an intense conversation - perhaps fueled by some happy intake of red wine - about the possible strategies we could implement to formally distinguish ourselves from the dominating discourse of modern dance. We were all schooled under the umbrella notion of so-called *contemporary dance*<sup>3</sup>, but found even that to be an exhausted concept. In a rather naive sense we decided to adopt choreography as a term that we hoped would somehow teleport the way our artistic work was being received out of various historically restrained discussions. The stress here was on the act of removing ourselves from certain discourse more than it was a

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<sup>3</sup> Within the field of dance history there exists till this day some scholarly debate as to how the period between the 1950s and 1970s should be categorized. Some people refer to it as postmodernism while others regard it to be the emerging stage of contemporary dance (Volbea 2018, 307-315). In any regard, it is useful to take note of the specific experimentation that took place during these years - especially by those artists who were involved in the Judson Dance Theatre in New York in the 1960's. One of the more important imprints of this period in dance history came from the abandonment of the idea that dance should reflect a story or an emotional state which in turn led to radical experimentation with form (Au: 1988:2002, 155-175).

Even though modern dance techniques continued to be taught and practiced around the world the undeniable impact of this period in dance history demanded a more progressive terminology as new styles, pedagogies and modes of composing were emerging. Despite its contentious meaning, *contemporary dance* was found to be signaling a sense of renewal and by the mid 1980's it was widespread in use. Since then contemporary dance - as a genre-defining term - has proven to be flexible enough to adapt and incorporate diverse artistic needs and sources of inspiration - perhaps to an extent where its capacity to absorb all potential dancing, prevents any attempt at forming counter-positions?

choice grounded on a well informed interest in the histories and contemporary discussions around the notion of choreography. I have since then identified my artistic work as choreography and continue to formally introduce myself as a choreographer.

In the years after making the collective decision to migrate away from the field of dance, my relationship to choreography developed extensively. Looking back, I would say that my practice aligned itself in some principle with the shift in choreographic discourse exemplified under the title *Expanded Choreography*<sup>4</sup>. This meant that I worked from an understanding of choreography as something that could be applied beyond the field of dance. As such, I involved myself in projects where choreographic thinking was applied in relation to different mediums, materials, thought practice and spaces. What influenced my thinking in this direction had little to do with the choreographic discourse unfolding around this time, but began rather in 2008 when I worked as an assistant for the architect and urban planner Peter Schultz Jørgensen. Here, I discovered in the most unexpected places of Jørgensen's thinking, truly diverse choreographic languages which translated into his writings, his exhibitions and his architectural sketches. His practice has always been dedicated to creating openings for unexpected movement to occur. Most central to him is the democratization of space (co-ownership/co-authorship), which often involves more open-ended plans that span over long periods of time (sometimes up to 20 years or more). In addition, he works with the idea of distribution of land to multiple projects, institutions and experimental ideas cohabiting a place in parallel times. One of the more extensive projects which we worked on together was on the first stage implementation of Jørgensen's vision for the *Musicon* neighborhood in Roskilde, Denmark (<https://musicon.dk/what-musicon>).

The learning I harvested from working with Jørgensen was complimented further in my collaborations with Marie-Louise Stentebjerg, which began in 2011 when we founded the duo two-women-machine-show. The premise we've always worked from within the duo is a slightly destabilized variation of the choreographer/dancer relationship—as we

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<sup>4</sup> *Expanded Choreography* refers to the ever-expanding and diverse manner by which choreography has been applied over the last 15 years. Its capacity in defining tools and strategies for engaging with movement of any type has made it a concept relevant for artists beyond the field of dance. As such choreography is now said to have evolved from being the means by which movement sequences are determined and performed by dancers to becoming an interdisciplinary artform in its own right (Rouhiainen & Østern 2020, 2-5). For further elaboration see also: *Expanded Choreography. Situations. Objects..* A conference organized by MACBA - Museo d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona in March, 2012. (<https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/34425/expanded-choreography/>).

inhabit between us both roles simultaneously. Rather than making dances for each other in a more traditional sense, what we've attempted to approach choreographically over the last nine years has been those aspects between us that overlap and intertwine e.g. shared space, shared imagination, shared language

### **1.2.1 MA Ecology and Contemporary Performance**

In 2016, I applied for the MA program *Ecology and Contemporary Performance* (MAECP) - a two year pilot program launched at the Theatre Academy, University of the Arts Helsinki - and was accepted. My primary motivation for applying to this program was based on a strong intuitive feeling I had that by exposing my practice to a concentrated context of studying and tackling questions related to the condition of living as an artist in a time of simultaneous crises it would open up new fields of enquiry for me. For the following two years, I found myself in the close company of five other young artists from different contexts seeking to address such questions relating to ecology and contemporary performance.

As part of my entry exam for the MAECP, I had formulated a research statement which looked into the human body's ability to be in movement beyond its own tangible surfaces for example via the transmission of heat. To formulate it in another way, I linked my choreographic thinking to the core subjects of the MA program (*ecology and contemporary performance*) by stating that if one of the fundamental insights of ecology is that all forms of matter are interconnected, then naturally we would have to reconsider the conditions that govern our ideas of body, its movement potential and of subject too. The movement deemed possible in this interconnected state of all things speaks to a capacity for blurring the lines of separation and allows an existence across borders. What we need, I expressed, are new means to internalise this condition, to be able to think through it, to gain understanding, both as a contemporary state of affairs but also in the light of a more extensive art history.

What I eventually ended up working on during my two years in Helsinki was not entirely different from the idea of dealing with movement traveling through and unfolding beyond the human body, only that the source of information which came to

open up my thinking, and which eventually led my collaborators and I towards the manifestation of Ality, drew more upon (meta)physics than human biology per se.

It's been a little over two years now since the pilot program of MAECP formally ended and I moved back to Copenhagen - back to the precarious conditions of living like a freelance artist on the peripheries of the established institutional frameworks. As I am re-reading this research statement now, with the perspective offered by the years that have passed since I wrote it, what is curious to me is how I had chosen to focus more on what I could call a concept of *movement as constant condition*<sup>5</sup> rather than using the terms choreography and choreographic practice to describe my position and interests as a choreographer. The emphasis on movement signals a shift that was coming into my thinking already back then: If movement is a constant condition the choreographer can no longer be defined as an agent that activates an otherwise stable environment or object. By incorporating such a concept, and holding it up against the normative understanding of the choreographer, it necessitates a reformulation and as a consequence of such reformulation it must alter the choreographic objects produced.

It is exactly on this note that the written part of my thesis picks up. It explores in which way the concept of *movement as constant condition* operates in the work of Ality, and in turn how this transformed my understanding of the role of choreographer and as such changed the nature of the choreographic object too? Furthermore this thesis attempts to unpack what potential these transformations might point towards, or indeed reveal, as my venture into trying to mend these conceptual gaps move forward.

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<sup>5</sup> The idea of a grander condition of movement is not a new one. The German physicist and founder of quantum mechanics Werner Heisenberg already proved this in 1927 with the Uncertainty Principle, which demonstrates the impossibility of defining absolute values of position and momentum in any physical system (Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy, "uncertainty principle", last modified 12th of July 2016). The principle establishes the fact that there is instability and an uncertainty of movement throughout the universe down to the quantum level which simultaneously deems the concept of a stationary object or stable space a perceptive illusion.

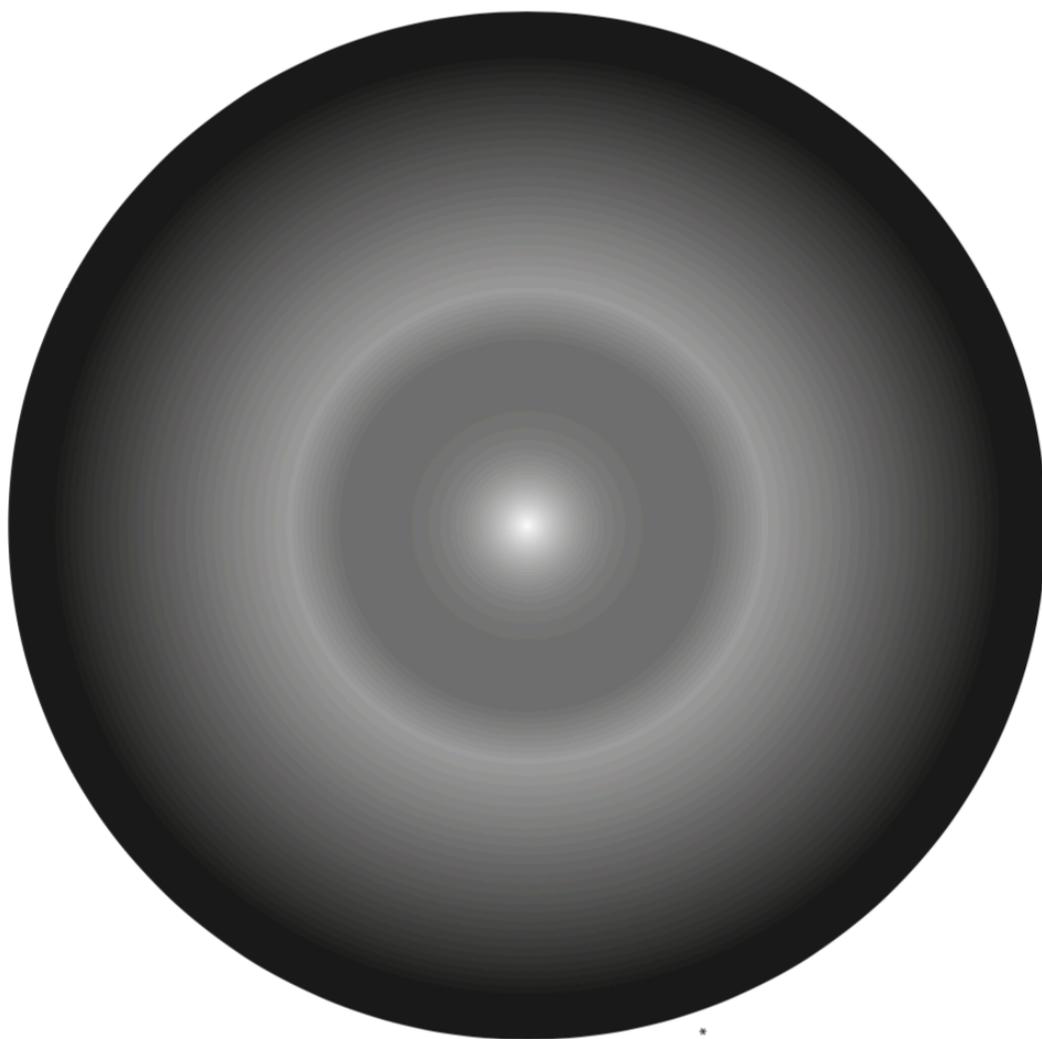


Ality is the result of a collective effort, of my collaborators and me choreographing, practicing, conceptualizing, planning, fundraising, translating, performing etc. together. However, this part of my thesis should be read as an expression of my trajectory and thinking alone. Although it can't be denied that I am also building on a shared language, the process of writing alone has led me down a more personal route on which I have been reflecting on how my understanding of choreographer and choreography has evolved in the light of making Ality as well as on how it is gaining yet another level of meaning as this final part of my thesis is being completed.

Accompanying my writing is a series of images that I've developed in collaboration with the DK based graphic designer Sam Moore. The artistic conversation between Sam and myself spans over almost ten years—during which he has helped me visualize aspects of my choreographic thinking that I have otherwise struggled to articulate in words. I read the images that we develop together in a similar manner to how one might read tarot—as a visual text composed across several dimensions referring simultaneously to pasts, presents and possible futures. In that sense the images function as both documentation, as portraits of current thinking as well as a medium that reveals different lines of thought that is being sent into a time which I have yet to experience. I have chosen to engage my collaboration with Sam and develop this series of images as a means to meet the conflicting friction that I feel between the requirement of linear writing and the non-linear developments that I am familiar with from more practice-based processes. I have inserted these images in places where I felt the text needed a gentle destabilization or a soft reminder of the multiple and incoherent strands of thought that move in parallel to my linearly written meaning.

Finally, I have submitted as a supplement to the filmed documentation of Ality a lexicon which was specifically produced for the second premiere of the work at Kunsthall Charlottenborg in Copenhagen (sep. 2018). The lexicon offers an insight into the diverse collection of references and terminology that each played their part in the process. I won't be elaborating on all the sources listed, but as a document I feel it tells a story about the priorities I have made here while at the same time attesting to all the other possible variations of this thesis that could have been.





## 1.4 Choreography

*Choreograph (v.): to arrange relations between bodies in time and space*

*Choreography (v.): act of framing relations between bodies; “a way of seeing the world”*

*Choreography (n.): result of any of these actions*

*Choreography (n.): a dynamic constellation of any kind, consciously created or not, self-organising or super-imposed*

*Choreography (n.): order observed . . . , exchange of forces; a process that has an observable or observed embodied order*

*Choreograph (v.): to recognize such an order*

*Choreography (v.): act of interfering with or negotiating such an order*

(Klien, Valk & Gormly 2008, 9)

The notion of choreography suggests a synthesis of numerous different things. The American choreographer and scholar Susan Leigh Foster elegantly sums it up in her introduction to her book *Choreographing Empathy: Kinesthesia in Performance*: “The word choreography derives from two Greek words, *choreia*, the synthesis of dance, rhythm and vocal harmony manifest in Greek chorus; and *graph*, the act of writing. The first uses of the term, however, are intertwined with two other Greek roots, *orches*, the place between the stage and the audience where the chorus performed, and *chora*, a more general notion of space, sometimes used in reference to a countryside or Region” (Foster 2011, 16-17).

The earliest accounts of notated dances that draw on this history speak to a complex relationship between the moving body and place that was then translated into written language. As such, choreography can be said to have begun as an act that brings into a dialogue process, place and printed symbol<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> The two Greek roots mentioned above are inextricably attuned to both the formal and entertainment aspects of the term Choreography. Within this chapter I am focusing on the historical lineage which ties up to the more formal usages of the term in order to make clearer how my own practice is positioned in relation to that history.

Coming into a more widespread use in the eighteenth century, the above described mode of practicing choreography provided the basis from which making, performing and teaching dances was differentiated. This insight, in turn, created greater demands for technical skill and delivered systems through which dances could be categorized (Foster 2011, 16). After disappearing from use in the nineteenth century it reappeared in the early twentieth century as a notion describing individual expression in dance. Since then the notion of choreography has been challenged, transformed and expanded to an immense degree. Art practitioners from various fields of art have throughout the twenty-first century turned to choreography as a means to explore any number of different entities, and the relations between them. As a term it naturally lends itself to ways of looking at how human bodies interact – with themselves and each other, with places, spaces and with time.

### 1.5 Genealogies

TRANS-, the piece that preceded *Ality*, was initiated as a research into the concept of “violence.” After much exploration, it was language and its totalizing habit that we focused on as a contemporary form of violence. Our problem became how we could revolt against a system (language) that could so easily incorporate and normalize any attempt to subvert it? The title TRANS- was to be understood as a type of prefix that suggests movement, conversion or change as exemplified in notions such as transformation, transducer, translation etc. The capacity to set something in motion became what we identified as the one tool that could, if only momentarily, destabilize an apparatus such as language and its defining habit. We found inspiration in Meisner technique, an actor’s training tool that came to prominence at the Neighborhood Playhouse School of the Theatre in New York in the 1970’s<sup>7</sup>. In accordance with some of the basic principles of Meisner’s practice the performers in TRANS- were tasked

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<sup>7</sup> Meisner Technique is a method that aims to bypass pre-taught choice making in acting by stimulating the actors natural instincts in the *live* moment. Through the means of repetition and intense observation of a scene partner the actor is able to release the authority traditionally given to a dramatic text and at the same time amplify the underlying emotional states that emerge from a real (rather than fictional) relationship to another actor. According to Sanford Meisner (the author of the technique) this fosters more organic situations on stage and helps the actor stay confident and able in a given scene (Meisner&Longwell, 1990). We were introduced to the Meisner technique via Scott Williams, a former student of Sanford Meisner, currently a Meisner technique teacher and artistic director of The Impulse Company (UK).

with establishing real relationships to the audience and describing, from their point of view, what they observed without agenda or inhibition.

In TRANS- the audience sits in a circle surrounding four performers on stage. The beginning is marked by the performers activating, simultaneously to their task of relating and describing, two underlying choreographic engines that help propel the dramaturgical development of the work. *Choreographic Engine* is a concept I have developed which describes a set of choreographic principles that when operative in practice creates a mobility that ensures the development of unforeseen insights, modes of expression and experiences for the performers practicing and the audience alike. Different from score (a principle initially borrowed from music), which in the broadest understanding of the term provides an artist with a set of predetermined actions to be executed, the choreographic engine is fueled by its context (audience reactions, properties of a given space, shifts in temperature and the like). The engine actively incorporates the intensities which are already present in a given context and gradually accelerates them. These components of the engine essentially prevent any attempt at reproducing its outcomes. In TRANS- one engine was activated on the level of semantics and set some parameters for what the performers directed their attention towards as well as what pronouns they would apply at different times. This created semantic patterns that lead the performers from describing immediate features, to including more felt intensities to finally adding metaphors into their descriptions<sup>8</sup>. The performers used only short, independent sentences, or *calls*, to ensure that one unique moment in a meeting is quickly replaced by the next moment and so forth. The other choreographic engine set the course for how the performers move through space sending them into a continuous spiraling motion - both as a group formation and as individual bodies. This subtle but constant movement supports the performers in their practice by never letting them (and in that sense the choreographic project at stake) settle into one stable image. The aim of the practice is precisely to stay sensitive towards the way bodies (in this case primarily human bodies) constantly signal and respond to each other and adapt the use of language to this ongoing (ex)change. In the

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<sup>8</sup> Somewhere in the process of making TRANS- we filmed an example of the vastly traveling stories that the practice in question could produce simply by tending to each moment in an experienced relationship to another. In this case the person described happen to be me, standing next to the camera like a deer in the highlight during one early morning rehearsal: <https://vimeo.com/127464499>

more successful moments of the performance it showed how an application of language as such allowed movement as opposed to the more static quality of its defining habit.

With the help of Santi Rieser's live-recording and editing techniques the production of text that happens in the performance gradually accumulates. The performers practice simultaneously staying true to the demands of each meeting they find themselves in. What is being said can both be heard live, but might also at times be amplified in different speakers. This has the effect of creating slight displacements or confusion between what is heard and its place of origin. The text that emerges gives everyone a common access point into the myriad of momentary relationships portrayed, but as time passes the performers' constant utterances begin to overlap and create fantastical mutations eventually dissolving into a more noise based soundscape. At the end all you hear is the entire performance replayed as distorted and densely layered echoes.

The choreographic object appearing on stage in TRANS- revealed itself to be polyphonic and multidirectional by hosting many voices, journeys, densities and modes of involvement at the same time. In this sense it proved itself to be extremely dynamic, but still the practice operated on a very lateral level between the bodies of the performers and the audiences. It honed in on the heard and unheard, seen and unseen, interplay between human beings, but paid less attention to the many other levels of activity and agencies that equally inform any situation - whether it's theatrically charged or not<sup>9</sup>. Even if we felt we took a great risk in choreographing a situation where the content produced was beyond our immediate control, it didn't instantly foster any further analysis of the way we had applied our choreographic thinking, what it meant for our ideas of the role of the choreographer, as well as what kind understanding of movement this kind of choreographic thinking lends itself to.

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<sup>9</sup> For a short visual insight into the staging of TRANS- see trailer here: <https://vimeo.com/180512990>





Looking back I would say that the experience with making TRANS- taught us how to keep our attention focused on the nature of an ever-changing site. It had the double effect of unmasking both the observed and observing subject from its socialized (and choreographic) normativity while also inevitably proposing new fluctuating layers. It was on this knife edge that this performance came into existence as an alternating and at times uneasy exposure of both audience and performer, as the limits of language were tested and an underbelly of unending movement and change came through. For us this was the lodestar for our interaction with the audience who in this case, quite literally, became 'fellow contributors'. However, this endeavor did not immediately reveal what we would be addressing in Ality later on, but it certainly pointed us in the direction of a different mode of choreographic thinking. One that re-situates the position of the choreographer from being one in control to being one that sits among an outplay of multiple events and movement.

The more important discoveries made in TRANS- which bled through and continued to expand and transform in the process of making Ality could perhaps be summarized as follows:

- The choreographic object: The emergence of a polyphonic and multidirectional choreographic object which reveals itself through each moment of the performers and audience members engaging in the practice.
- Movement: A growing interest in engaging choreographically with a material reality that changes all the time and which no one in the performance situation can be said to be (materially) exterior to.
- Role of the choreographer: In order to engage with a material reality that changes all the time the power and control traditionally managed by the choreographer must be redistributed so that the choreographic emphasis is on the movement which is already unfolding prior to any choreographic interference.

## 2. ALITY

### 2.1 Initiating Ality



The process of developing Ality began in spring 2016 with the rather unexpected invitation to pitch a new work to a strict jury of German dramaturges in the context of a major Berlin-based theatre festival. Our pitch was to be one among five and the lucky winner, if selected, would receive full funding for a future production and get to tour it among several theaters in different German speaking countries. The prize seemed completely unreal for a small independent group such as ours that at this moment in time could barely convince Danish theaters to take our work on board. As it came to show, we did not embody the appropriate profile for such an endeavor. Instead a lucky duo from Croatia, who were more used to operating in large scale production houses, ran with the prize. Luckily, the material we produced for the pitch seemed relevant enough to convince the Danish Arts Council to follow up and support us in the fall of

2016. A couple of months later our little group sat on a small single propelled postal airplane on its way from Tromsø towards a remote town in the very Northern part of Norway. Here the more formal and indeed practical process of developing Ality began in the rare context of a well funded (even in Scandinavian measures) residency program.

Before developing the content of the pitch, we had as a group a brief phase of interest in the global phenomena of addiction to virtual reality, but it soon evolved into the inversion of that term: not virtual reality, but the reality of the virtual. This development instantly placed our thinking in some degree of alignment with the previous work we'd premiered (TRANS-, 2015) and opened up the possibility for us to continue investigating the things we'd discovered in that process.

As a ubiquitous term, the word *virtual* often refers to something generated by new, digital technologies. However, the understanding of the “virtual” as a concept arguably dates back to the 1800's, and the development of practical photography. During that time, experiencing a remnant of the physical forever captured in a flat timeless image would have been as transcendent to another ephemeral reality as current virtual reality technologies. With both these rudimentary examples of a “virtual” reality, as with contemporary ones, they both share the qualities of transporting the human imagination into a space that simultaneously exists, has existed and does not exist. In addition, throughout these paradoxical encounters, the mind and body are still able to yield to the idea that what is being experienced is both real and not real.

However, in relation to Ality, we derived *our* understanding of the virtual from the Slovenian philosopher Slavoj Žižek who describes it as a quality of immanence - as an infinite field of potential from which reality is actualized (*Manufacturing Reality: Slavoj Žižek and the Reality of the Virtual* 2004, 0:30-1:00). Or, following Žižek's more popularized account in which he uses the concept of attractors from physics to describe the virtual and its actualizing capacity, the virtual is not something real in itself, but rather a kind of hyper state of the real, an abstract field of intensity that structures existing elements around itself curving space in such a way that patterns, form or other

types of expression emerges from it (*Manufacturing Reality: Slavoj Žižek and the Reality of the Virtual* 2004, 18:30-23:40).

At the very early phases of our research, we thought of the virtual, and indeed Ality as a piece, as the enhancement of that moment in TRANS- before the performer speaks and proposes a momentary narrative for the given relationship established with an audience member. Before the politics of language takes over and a dynamic field of possibles is open as a kind of vibrant silence. However, as our research deepened I came to understand the virtual as something closer to an underlying state of permanent movement, like an infinite swelling out of which a multiplicity of possible outcomes can appear. As such it does not end or close as a space when language is introduced.

The title Ality was an attempt from our side to gently point towards the nature of such phenomena and at the same time avoid fixing any literal meaning to it. It refers concretely to the suffix *al + ity* which in the English language turns an adjective into a noun. In this sense *al + ity* is a meaning transforming grammatical tool that extracts the characteristic state, nature or phenomena out of a thing or quality of being. For example, spirituality is the characteristic phenomena of the quality of 'being spiritual' - or perhaps a more relevant example to use here would be virtuality describing as such the characteristic state of the quality of the virtual.

With Ality we wanted to tap into the virtual, and the permanent movement which underlies all of existence, bringing it to the surface, expressing it not as a subtext that colors pre-rehearsed dances, but as text in its own right. To reveal through choreographic means the very momentum that leads to a multiplicity of non-contradictory possibilities. The endeavour represented—as was in our understanding—a very hopeful act, as it was saying in this dull, impenetrable normativity that seems so unwilling to brook a change there are cracks, which by their very nature, offer us something not yet known.



For a year and half, and especially in the context of different residencies and smaller process presentation formats, we met and worked on *Ality* until it was finally presented at the Theatre Academy, University of the Arts Helsinki on february 16th and 17th, 2018. Even if the fundamental structure of the piece had already landed by then we continued to polish the details of the work during a final residency at PACTZollverein in Essen, Germany as well as in the period leading up to the second premiere of *Ality* at Kunsthal Charlottenborg in Copenhagen in September 2018.

## **2.2 A few notes on the virtual**

As it relates to the choreographic work '*Ality*,' the initial interest in the virtual led us to a more elaborated series of questions about the philosophical, practical and aesthetic implications of the virtual when translated into choreographic thinking. My collaborators and I started drawing from Manuel DeLanda's book *Intensive Science and Virtual Philosophy* (DeLanda, 2002) in search of furthering our understanding of the virtual.

The identity of objects which inhabit the world, DeLanda writes, are generally established by the determination of their tangible properties (e.g. volume, temperature, speed etc.), but that determination does not exhaust their entire reality. On the contrary, to gain knowledge about objects, we create representations of them as possessors of their properties and perform interventions on them in the hope of them manifesting their full variety of capacities and tendencies. However, it is commonly understood now that these kinds of performed interventions are always doubled because the capacity 'to affect' must also be coupled with the capacity to 'be affected' in return. Therefore, a way of thinking about objects as something that entails an infinite number of possibly changing factors is needed.

In DeLanda's book, we found a concrete proposal that described the reality of non-actual determinants of identity. Meaning, the reality of that which is possible, but is not currently manifested or exercised in the world. DeLanda names this 'dimension of dimensions' *possibility space* and offers not only a metaphysical speculation on its structure but an elaboration on how it reaches beyond itself and relates to other spaces and times as well.

As seen above, the primary aspects of DeLanda's conceptual thinking are explored in relation to 'extensive matter,' meaning the realm of objects. However, in *Ality*, the idea of *possibility space* [virtual space] was engaged with through a group of human performers. Specifically, the choreographic practice in the work did not exclusively centre around the performers' extensive parts (their physical bodies). It also identified and activated - perhaps more importantly - their intensive qualities such as the flow of thought and emotion, the capacities of their imagination and their ability to navigate the different types of charged spaces that opened up between themselves and present audiences etc.

It is essential for me to stress here that this chapter does not aim to become a philosophical examination of DeLanda's thinking as experienced in the setting of a choreographic work like *Ality*. In practice, the concepts offered in DeLanda's book from 2002, served rather (as it does here) as a conceptual frame. It became a necessary point of orientation in a process that eventually introduced my collaborators and me to a

handful of other thinkers too and led us to what we've now come to understand as an interesting and completely unexpected reconfiguration of the notion of choreographer, choreography and to some extent the performing subject too.

The following part of my thesis aims to answer the question of what led to these unexpected reconfigurations. It will do this by diving into the details of the choreographic practice and the compositional choices in *Ality*. I will explore these aspects by coupling them with certain concepts that helped further the research as the work was developing. Finally, I will attempt to discuss the openings that such reconfigurations allow concerning the notion of choreography and its possible futures.

### **2.3 Some examples of the virtual as choreography**

*Ality* as a choreographic work that deals with the notion of the virtual is conceptually related to two other choreographic works: *While We Were Holding It Together* (2006) by the Croatian/Dutch choreographer Ivana Müller and Danish choreographer Mette Ingvarstsen's *Speculations* (2011). In both works, the choreographers use a kind of language choreography to illustrate the capacity of the virtual via an activation of the audience members' imagination. In the case of Ingvarstsen's *Speculations* she stands in an empty theatre space surrounded by standing audience members. Here she unfolds in great detail a fictional story about a spectacular choreographic work featuring ten dancers which is not actually being physically presented. Müller's approach in *While We Were Holding It Together* is similar. In her work, five dancers lie or stand still in awkward unchanging positions. One by one they describe different scenarios that might explain the tableau they're in. In both cases the choreographers are drawing on the audience's imagination to activate a virtual process that refers to something that could have happened or could be happening in a different temporality than the one the audiences are experiencing as the two pieces unfold.

In her doctoral dissertation *Expanded Choreography: Shifting the Agency of Movement in the Artificial Nature Project and 69 Positions* (2016), Ingvarstsen describes this mode of imaginary choreography and its capacity to connect to the virtual as follows:

*Speculations* took an approach that extended choreography beyond the body of the performer, but also beyond the walls of the theater, by using language and imagination to connect to the virtual. An approach that disembodied movement from the body of the dancer or performer, by understanding choreography as something produced in the space between words, places, temporalities, as well as between different forms of reality (Ingvarstsen 2016, 55-56).

Both pieces unfold on a rather absent backdrop which the capacity of the virtual - through the imagination of the audiences - fills out.

In *Ality*, the performers produce short utterances that sometimes insinuate a situation or a relationship that is not real, but could be. In that way there are moments where *Ality* appeals to the imagination of its audiences in order to activate a virtual process, but overall *Ality* as a choreographic work is not only language based, but primarily a practice based work. The way that the virtual is invited to actualize in *Ality* is different.

A way to illustrate the difference between the two pieces described above and *Ality* is to first understand the philosophical distinction that Manuel DeLanda makes (following the definition of Deleuze) between capacity and property in the article *New Materialities* (DeLanda 2015):

A knife is partly defined by its properties, such as having a certain shape or weight, as well as being in a certain state, like the state of being sharp. A sharp knife, on the other hand, has the capacity to cut things, a capacity that can be exercised by interacting with entities that have the capacity to be cut: cheese or bread, but not a solid piece of titanium. Philosophically, there is an important distinction between properties and capacities. Properties are always actual, since at any given point in time the knife is either sharp or it is not. But the causal capacity to cut is not necessarily actual if the knife is not currently being used. This implies that capacities can be real without being actual. The technical term for this ontological condition is virtual (DeLanda 2015, 2).

Following this sense the virtual can precisely be translated into a practical expression of itself when we are triggered to imagine something that isn't happening, but could be.

However in Ality, the performers invite the virtual to inhabit them and in this meeting between the abstract intensities of the virtual and their real bodies the strict philosophical differentiation between capacity and property begin to blur. Concretely speaking, their bodies constitute actual entities because of their extensive properties, but through the choreographic practice the mode in which these bodies express themselves is closer to something I would call a capacity of the virtual. Here they attempt to give themselves over to the intensities which exist before a thought is fully articulated or an emotion takes over. Residing physically in a virtual space means never fully manifesting.

There is a certain danger in creating a choreographic work in which the performers never fully manifest themselves nor the choreographic object at stake, but there is also a political and poetic potential to be found here: A direct provocation against any insistence on the "complete and defined" as the only possibility of being. If the "incomplete" is where imagination flourishes - it is only in the light of this incompleteness that we can build our utopias and formulate new futures.

#### **2.4 A sequential practice in four stages**

In Ality, the performers inhabit the virtual and invite it to manifest through their bodies. This process is made possible via three different choreographic concepts that are operative in the performers in parallel times. One of these parts is a sequential practice consisting of four stages: The Witness, Opening, Turning Space and Celebration. The sequence is a movement that facilitates or gathers a very individual energy and collectivises it, shares it such that it becomes an actor in the space that through accretions starts to gather its own momentum and begins its own dance.

The material and audience related conditions for the work were as follows: As the audience enters into Ality they are invited to find a spot in the space from where they

wish to be with the work. During the three hour long duration of the work they are free to move around, find new spots to sit, to lie or stand, to leave and to re-visit it at their own pace. On the floor nine roles of clear mirror vinyl are rolled out in different lengths. Together with some technical equipment and four long white molton curtains, which cover smaller seemingly random areas along the wall, these scenographic elements suggests to the audience different types of spaces with different relationships and proximities to the performers<sup>10</sup>.

The four performers are instructed to move in an orbital formation meaning, they maintain throughout the three hours the same circular relationship to each other and direction in space although the speeds at which they travel around their individual orbits can vary. In the case of the Helsinki presentation of *Ality I* maintained the inner, and thus the smallest orbit, Jonathan's enveloped mine, Yujin's orbit enveloped Jonathan's and Marie-Louise's was the last which also meant she had the largest orbit. A fifth, but slightly different orbit was maintained by musician Santi Rieser who moved in the same line as the audience. His practice was similar to ours except his output was sound-based. The choreographic concept of the orbits ensure that as the performers move and alter their positions during the three hours of the work they are constantly redefining, but still holding, a specific constellation between them.

In the beginning of *Ality*, the performers all start off in the first stage of the sequential practice entitled *The Witness*, which can be understood as a type of baseline that sets a tone through the entire three hours. As the performers advance through the stages of the practice they are ideally adding new layers to the base rather than jumping from one choreographic strategy to another. This means that they commit to the order of the sequence, but they navigate in a way that lets them either advance or retreat through the set order of the four stages.

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<sup>10</sup> For the second premiere in Copenhagen textile artist and set designer Lea Paulsen had hand dyed 7 panels of silk organza curtains which were hung in a way that they not only defined different types of spaces for the audience, but they also offered different colored filters through which the work could be viewed. For visual reference see: <https://vimeo.com/303089832>

Before getting into the details of what these four stages of the practice entails and how they're connected I would like to introduce the last of the three concepts mentioned

above, which we initially started developing during the making of TRANS-. We call this concept *The Channeling Body* and it is perhaps best described as an idea which is activated via the imagination. Within the human body there is a series of interrelated energetic centres placed along a central hub spanning from the top of the head down to the root of the pelvic area. In some cultures these energetic centres are referred to as chakras in others they may be referred to as glands. Studying their different properties and the stories linked to these places in the body we imagined a long column surrounding them which could somehow be cleared and opened up as a channel. Through this channel the performers are able to receive information, letting it filter through these organs that have no agenda or rational cognition, before it is sent back out. In TRANS- it became a kind of soft, systematic image of the body that encouraged a type of flow in thought, or constant coming into being.

The Witness is intimately connected to the image of The Channeling Body, which in Ality functions as a way of being with one's context without any intention. It is a complete global openness and non judgemental awareness that is experienced in 360 degrees. The Witness is trying to achieve an opaqueness of being, not a disappearance but an allowing of information to pass through the central channel of the body. The performers extend the capacity of their sense organs as far out as possible and let the sensations absorbed flow through them with as little obstruction as possible. A necessary part of coming into the witnessing stage is trusting that everything is being received. This position feels like a shift from a limited conception of consciousness bound by some kind of cognitive capacity and ability to define to one that says that every action in the cosmos is imprinting on me and I can be in a state of acceptance. In this sense The Witness requires a lot of grounding. Once the performer has established the base tone of the practice, which is The Witness in combination with the concept of The Channeling Body, the next stage can be activated.

The Opening is a moment of transition where the opaqueness of the witnessing stage turns into a more specific focus without forgetting the image of The Channeling Body. We recognize this moment as something similar to what the french writer Helene

Cixous refers to as *a call from the dark* (Cixous 1993, 24). In her book *Three Steps on the Ladder of Writing* (1993) she answers the question “what is reading?” by pointing to the fact that reading begins already in the very act of picking up a book:

That is what we do. We pick up something in the dark. We don't know what we will pick up. We always do this: we pick up a book, but we don't know why. And it happens to be our parent, since the only way to find our real parent is to pick up a book: in the dark. It is mysterious. Maybe it is the parent on the shelf that has chosen us, but it can't be explained. Anyway, this is the way we happen on those books that will change our lives. Of course we have at least heard a signifier, but we do choose in this completely blind way and it turns out to be light (Cixous 1993, 24).

In no way can the transition into the opening be instigated cognitively. It is rather like an energetic hook that catches the performers attention and offers them an entry into another individual through who an exchange begins to happen. The performer meets this other person as honestly as they can. Neither inventing or embellishing, nor denying what is received. This meeting is often experienced like a flicker book of associations that run in front of the eyes and as these associations begin to settle an image forms, which is then turned into a distinct feeling. The feeling indicates a relationship. The performers avoid putting a name to the relationship they just experience it. From this experience comes utterance. In this situation we define utterance as what needs to be said or what can't not be said. The ambition is to let the utterance be spoken at the same time as it is thought, but in reality the words come and go out of a kind of hesitation, they linger and ultimately stagnate before they can be said. The performers have to find a way around this. Often by leaving a sentence which has presented itself and waiting to see if it insistently comes back in ones mind can one perceive this return as a sign that the sentence needs to be spoken.

When the exchange in a relationship can't be sustained any longer from a certain position in space the performer shifts to a new place and a new position. It is a natural adjustment, which leaves the space of the former relationship and readies the body for the possibility of a new one. This is the stage we call Turning Space which is

determined by the travel along a performers orbit. It is an intensification of the collective as the shift in one performer re-situates the space for the others too. This often triggers a collective turning before the space settles again and some find themselves heading into the fourth stage of the practice called Celebration while others retreat back into the opening stage. In this way the performers each have their individual journeys through the practice. In some moments it may be that all performers end up in the same stage of the practice at the same time. This is often the case for the Celebration.

The Celebration comes when it does as a result of an overflow or accumulation of some kind of language, the babble forming into an intense pull that moves the body. Sometimes vivid dances appear that pulls the other performers into their infectious intensities at other times it's expressed as a series of smaller gestures. In either case the performers experience a kind of simultaneous letting go and letting out. Sometimes if the Celebration escalates into a more vibrant variation of common dancing it may be experienced as a wash of the entire space. A re-setting of some sorts. However, the nature of the choreographic concepts present in Ality ensures that nothing ever ends, but what follows one moment is an elaboration of the former which then develops into something else etc. It creates the sensation of successive moments where one simply leads to another a kind of flow that gives little attention to such ideas as ending or beginning. The Celebration can only be followed by a retreat into the Turning Space stage from where a performer might find herself advancing soon after back into another stage of Celebration or receiving *a call from the dark* which then takes her to the stage of the Opening.

## **2.4 Practice - across realms of the virtual and the actual**

As seen in the previous chapter the choreographic practice in Ality acts as the stem of the work. While being well aware that by announcing a choreographic work to be

oriented around its practice one implicitly invokes the echoes of a discursive debate which has been amplified especially in the last couple of years concerning current applications of the notion of practice. I do not wish to fully open up here the complexities related to this notion, but it feels important to use this opportunity to

introduce a slightly more defined understanding of it in order to deepen the analysis of Ality further.

Two years ago the editorial alliance between White Chapel Gallery and MIT Press published a new anthology in the series Documents of Contemporary Art dedicated to practice. In its introduction written by Marcus Boon and Gabriel Levine it is stated that the notion of practice has become more than widespread in use describing different types of activity in everything from the arts to science, from theory to politics as well as in everyday life. Boon and Levine even take it so far as to announce the early stages of the twenty-first century as the ‘practical turn’ signaling a shift away from the autonomy of the artwork towards more open ended processes and projects (Boon&Levine 2018, 13). Critics of this tendency problematize that in spite of its frequent and diverse use little effort seems to be spent addressing the layers and histories that the notion implies. In some cases this tendency makes it an overly inclusive container that might blur the capacities as well as the consequences of an artist’s work rather than clarify it (Boon&Levine, 12).

Without a more clear analytical apparatus available it seems that the *practicing* artist is left rather vulnerable to the extreme demands that neoliberal reforms exert on her. The artist who defines herself by practice is deemed to be infinitely active and must produce with the ambition to achieve an ever higher quality of work, because that is the measure by which the artist comes into existence in a neoliberal economy. It is the will to work itself which is of importance rather than achieving what the Greeks - who originally introduced the concept of artistic practice - considered to be the essential value of an artists practice [*poiesis*], which is the ability to: “bring something into being” and to “open up truth and building worlds for man’s dwelling on earth” (Agamben 2018, 61-64). Leaning especially on the first definition of poiesis as the artistic capacity to

*bring something into being* the practice in Ality can be opened up for further analysis by asking what it is it brings into being, what kind of choreographic object it creates.

First and foremost, the practice in Ality is a mode of performing that allows the performers to inhabit the virtual and invite it to actualize through the simultaneous activation of the three choreographic concepts which constitute it. In the constant fluctuation between the abstraction of the virtual and the concreteness of their real bodies, the performers create a poetic potential, an opening for the articulation of new metaphors, an incompleteness of meaning that leaves space for the indescribable, the not yet articulated to express itself. This opening or incompleteness might at some points in the performance appear as a type of absence in the performers, but rather than being vacant or empty the performers are simply binding themselves to that which has not yet come into being by letting it enter and filter through them<sup>11</sup>. The spoken utterances, the turning of their orbital constellation or the release into a moment of “celebration” become the expressions of momentary actualizations of the virtual intensities that imprint on them.

These actualizations come into the realm of the real (corporal actualizations) as a kind of multiple and incoherent pattern of events. In parallel times the practice also produces, as a kind of inverted but non-replicated image of itself, a multiple and incoherent pattern of events within the realm of memory and imagination (virtual actualizations), both in the performer and in the present audience members. In this way the choreographic object stretches itself across realms of the virtual and the actual.

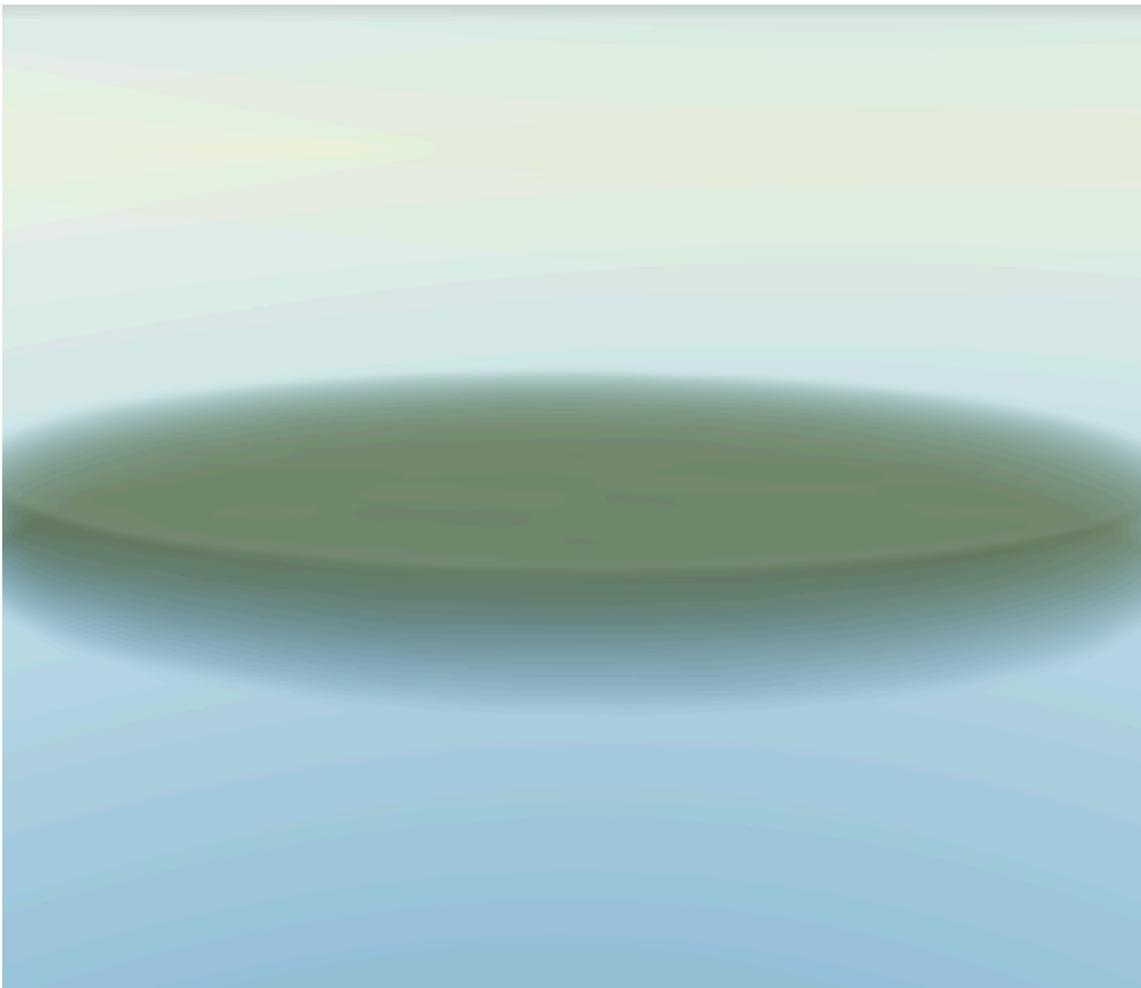
The performance practice in Ality also constitutes a site and method for choreographic research to take place led by the performers—while performing. The very presence of audiences, the choreographic concepts which bind the performers together and to the virtual, are all necessary components that complete a methodological vehicle through which choreographic research takes place. This leads the performers in the moment of performing to new embodied insights and understandings of the virtual. The insights

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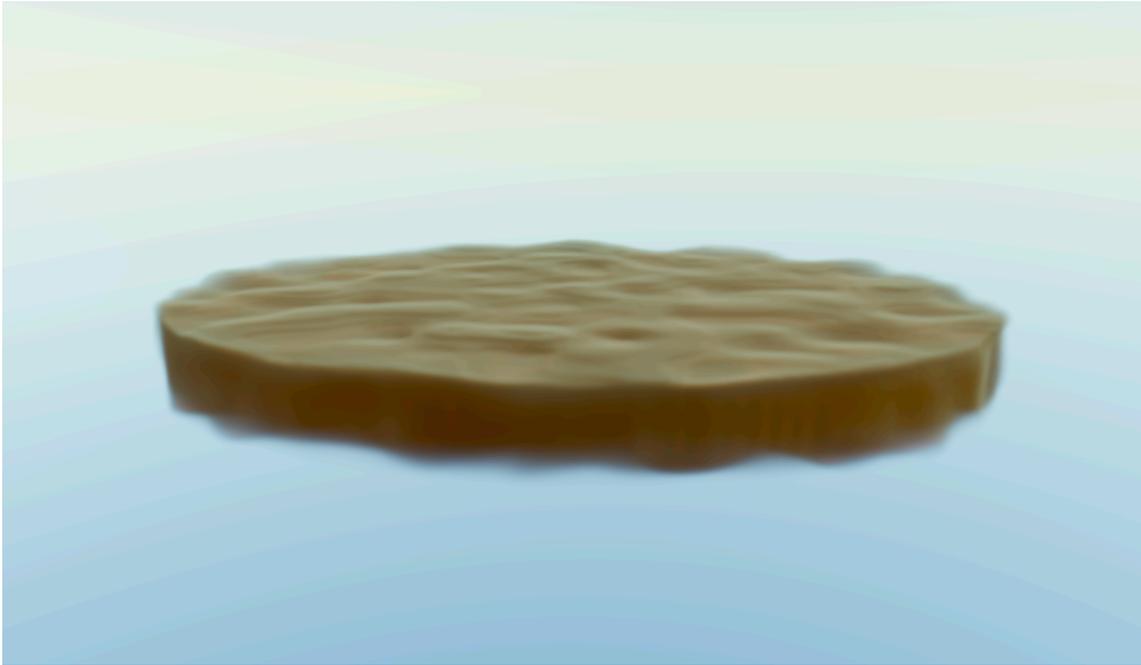
<sup>11</sup> The body of the performer provides an absent space within itself which it in turn fills with another type of absence - unactualized meaning. This absence of absences has a kind of kinship to the French theatre director Vincent Roumagnac's concept of Hyper-absence. For further elaboration on Roumagnac's concept see the Ality Lexicon (*Ality*, Lexicon, 22).

accumulated are gathered and compared in an attempt at building a collective language around the virtual.

The choreographic object in Ality is constituted by several interconnected layers that operate in parallel times. When zooming out in an attempt at encapsulating it with some sort of meaning, we discover that on the very level of ontology, it resists any assigning of a stable identity. Its very nature is like a prolonged movement on the verge of expressing itself.



### 3. CONCLUSION

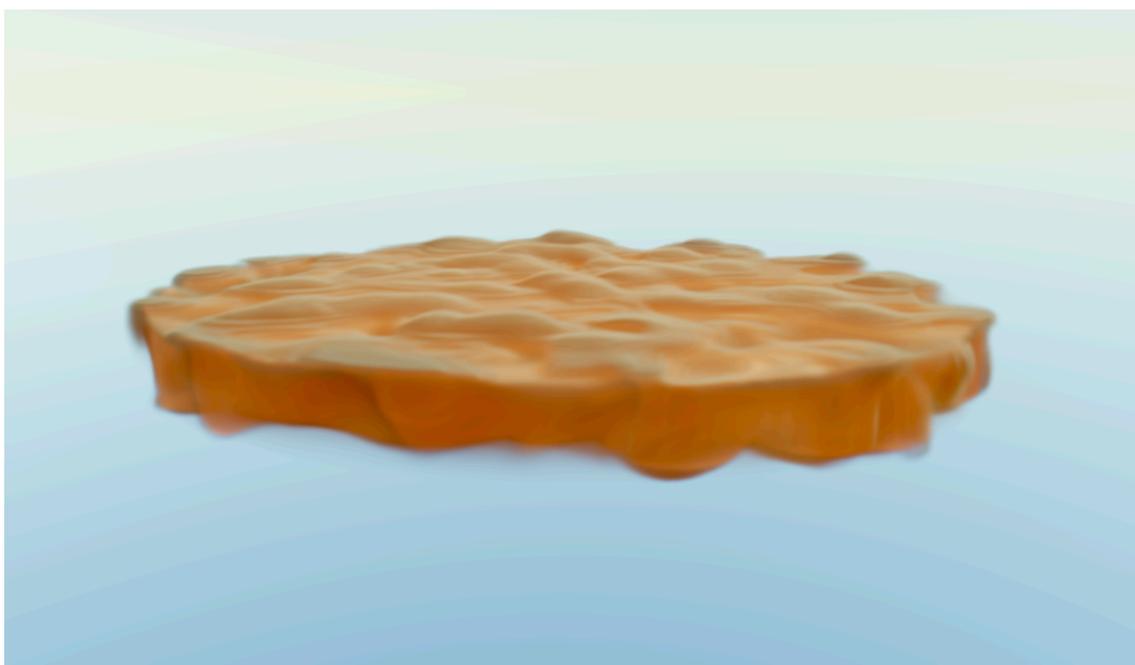


What started in the choreographic work 'TRANS-' as a research into the totalizing habit of language—as a contemporary expression of violence—eventually led our attention towards an understanding of material reality as something that changes all the time. By studying Meisner technique we were able to conceive of other people as sites of constant change rather than fixed meaning and so the choreographic concepts (referred to as engines) that were developed involved performer/audience interactions which influenced the progression of the work and produced a choreographic object that proved to be both polyphonic and multidirectional.

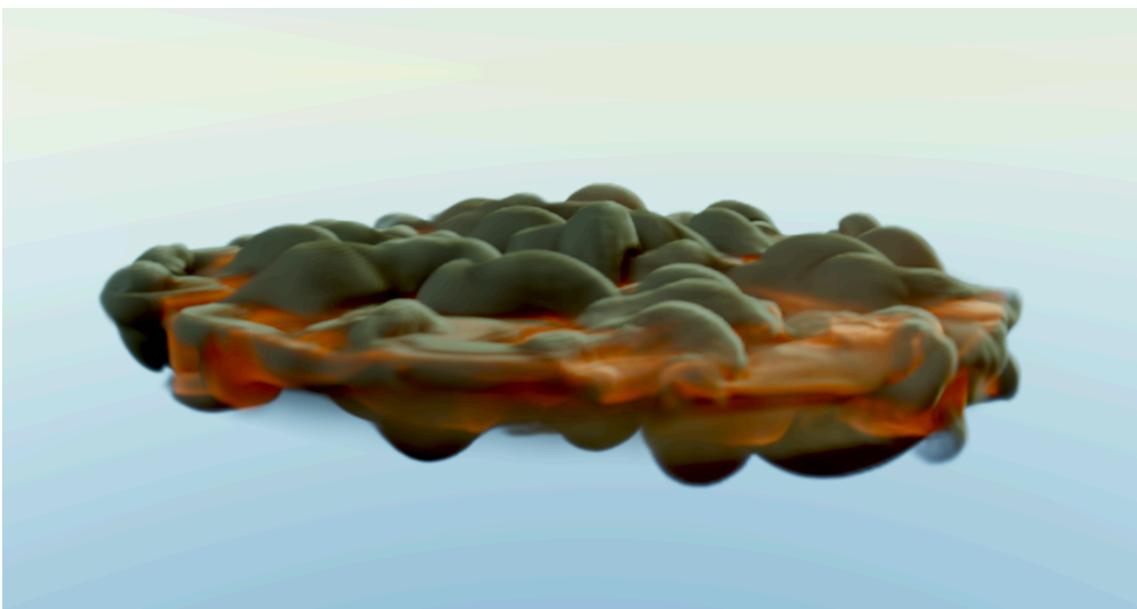
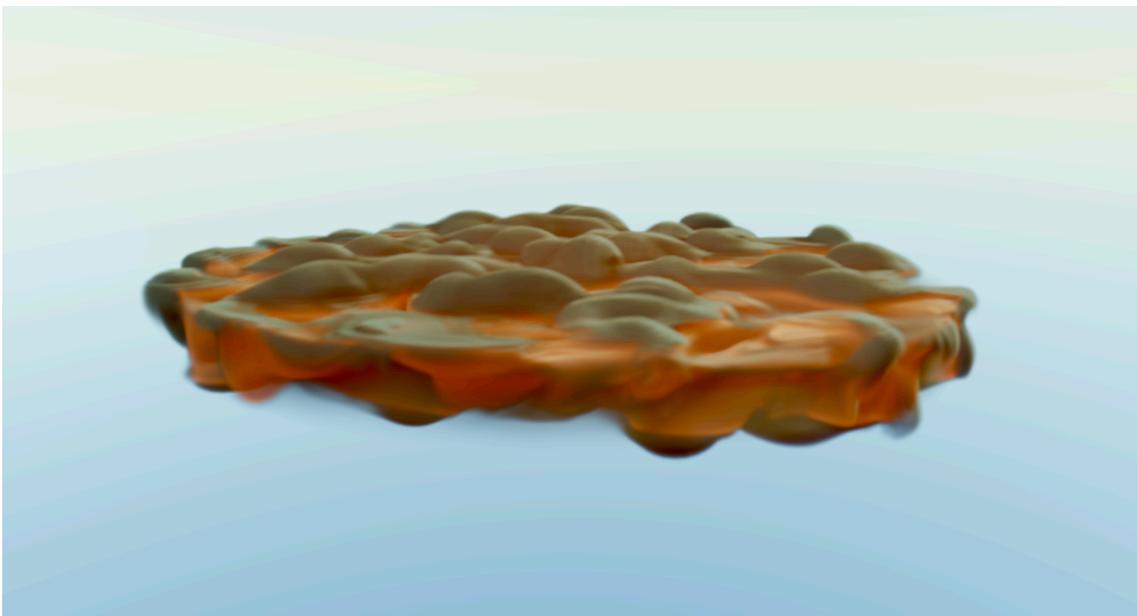
The insights developed in TRANS- included a different experience of a choreographic object which emerges in the light of choreographic practice rather than being pre-set, it fostered a growing interest in a material reality which changes all the time and which no one in the performance situation can be said to be (materially) outside of and it asked for a re-definition of the role of the choreographer so that the choreographic emphasis is placed on the movement which is already present prior to any choreographic interference.

The insights listed above fed into the work of *Ality* which became an exploration into the virtual and its philosophical, aesthetic and practical implications when applied to choreographic practice. In *Ality*, the performers attempt to inhabit the virtual and in so doing they invite it to actualise through their bodies. Via the means of a choreographic practice in four stages, an orbital formation in space and an image of a channeling body the performers have several means through which momentary actualization of the virtual takes place in the work. At the same time inhabiting the virtual also produces a mode of expression in the performer which could be perceived as an absence, which in turn might blur the choreographic object at stake. However, as my research shows this absence is not to be misunderstood as empty. Instead it can be defined as the reality of the virtual which in its fullest capacity is an intensity of something which has yet to manifest.

The choreographic object in *Ality* is constituted by several interconnected layers that are operative at the same time. As such it has in its very nature a resistance against any single definition. Instead it might be better understood - in alignment with the Virtual - as a prolonged movement on the verge of expressing itself.



In letting my choreographic thinking be influenced by such fields as metaphysics, quantum mechanics and ecology I have been able to transform my understanding of movement from being something which is ontologically dependent on states of stability, towards a kind of overarching continuum present in everything. As such, there is no “stable.” This transformation in meaning allows me to produce choreographic experiments that conceives of the human body, alongside place, the spatial and the temporal as, above all, an expression of interlinked processes. When choreographic practice is inserted into such a conception – unexpected ideas, imaginary spaces, and patterns are prone to appear.



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