

Ponderings with Breathing /Breathing with Ponderings

Introduction

This article weaves thoughts together that have emerged out of my ponderings on breathing in relation to my choreographic practice, the somatic breathing practice *Perceptual Breathing*, performance art, scholarship on contemporary expanded choreography, and philosophy. These thoughts reflect an interest in choreography, as well as to attention and stillness in the context of contemporary choreography that situates itself close to performance. The overall aim of this text is to think-in-writing-with-breathing about the concepts and practices mentioned and their possible interdependencies. Thinking with breathing entails the use of breath as a metaphor for making and taking space, and invite non-linearity into the process of thought. Metaphors are, in the frame of this text, not understood as universal but as situate and particular to each person because they are expressions coming out of specific situations and experiences: For someone having e.g. experienced anxiety, using breath as metaphor can allow for new perspectives that create a feedback loop of openness in one self.

The writer of the article speaks from her position of artist-researcher with a background in contemporary choreography.

The notion of artistic research is understood as it is practiced in the Northern country of Finland where artistic research takes place inside the art academies and where artistic research is understood as a continuation of institutional critique (Kirkkopelto 2015). The type of writing used in this article is alluding to scholarly writing protocols and yet, the author proposes writing as a “technology of subjectivity” (Preciado 2020).

The notion of contemporary choreography is understood in reference to the various attempts to expand the notion and practice of choreography and question its connection to dance as e.g. artists Maria Hassabi, Jennifer Lacey, Xavier Le Roy have done since the 1990s. Theoretical debates about extended choreographic protocols are also documented in e.g. writings by scholars such as Jenn Joy (2014), André Lepecki (2015) or through artistic research reflections by artist-researchers such as the Author (2018), Ingri Fiksdal (2018), Simo Kellokumpu (2019).

This article foregrounds processuality rather than the fixing of knowledge. The article is supported by the idea of indeterminacy as unending dynamism (Barad, 2012). When assisting with this dynamic indeterminate process, the reader is invited to consider their activity as the walk of a passer-by: A passer-by walking through a landscape-in-process populated by thoughts expressed in words. In this landscape, sense-making is an ever-changing dimension of the activity of walking: Borrowing the words of performance scholar and artist Jenn Joy who quotes Paul Virilo: “A landscape has no fixed meaning, no privileged vantage point. It is orienting only by the itinery of the passerby.” (Joy 2014, 30). Ultimately, the text alternates between the writer-responsible and reader-responsible styles. However, the overall approach to the readership is reader-responsible.

...inhaling....

Examples of contemporary scholarship about breath:

For phenomenologist Petri Berndtson breathing precedes perception. In his dissertation “The Primacy of Breathing” he argues that breath can teach us a new respiratory ontology (Berndtson 2017). Philosopher Lenart Skof works similarly on a paradigmatic change of the theoretisation on breathing while also developing a new theory of intersubjectivity that he describes as the ethics of breathing (Skof 2015). Activist and philosopher Franco “Bifo”

Berardi inquires into breath from a different angle: for him breath also sheds light on the socio-political state of a society (Berardi 2018). Gender study scholar Magdalena Gorska uses breath as a tool for analysing and creating intersectional feminist politics by building the idea of breathing as an intra-activ phenomenon (Gorska 2016).

Side note on references:

Concerning all references that come up in this text:

I have been engaged in thinking about the assumption and expectations towards artist-researchers regarding how one works with references and with theory, and how one is supposed to be on top of references and theory. Being on top of e.g. theory entails that I can swiftly move with theory because I can handle it. It won't slip out of my hands. I have control. I am curious to think about the relation to references, and ultimately, knowledge, differently; in a more precarious and yet intimate relation; more affectively. Staying on the surface and on the level of the skin of theory, not holding tight to it in order to enter theory, in order to go deep. I rather propose staying at the surface as a way to build a space where

eventually one does not know anymore whether theory carries the artist's thinking or whether the artist's thinking carries the theory.

My concern with giving up control in the face of theory is analogous to my interest in thinking with breathing. Breathing is most often identified as a linear and causal process of breathing in and breathing out. That is a process that because of its causality and predictability can be controlled. However, through this article and its structure I want to hint at a variety of temporalities of breathing where control is not a topic. Where the breathing pattern is less predictable.

The insertions of bits of texts between the markers inhaling, exhaling and breath silence should productively complicate the sense of experience one has when reading, when breathing:

While breathing, various thoughts appear and vanish, differently structured memories and situated experiences take place with every breath one takes. So, the aforementioned markers should be understood as an invitation to transgress - based on one's own

situated condition of breathing -
the rhythm of the text. The
markers serve as a choreographic
score that needs to be interpreted
by each individual reader.

I restart:

I start with the start, start with the practice.

As I have written else where (Author 2018), my choreographic practice has been informed by the Middendorf breathing practice *Perceptual Breathing*.

Side note 1 on *Perceptual Breathing*:

In 2003, I have been initiated to practice breathing through the breathing practice, *Perceptual Breathing* of Ilse Middendorf (1910 – 2009).

Middendorf developed a breathing practice where the main aim is to pay attention to one's breathing so that in the end there is consciousness of one's breath.

Middendorf differentiates between three types of breaths: There is breath that lays in the

unconscious: as long as we live, we breath and we don't need to think about it (1). There is breath that is consciously and wilfully used to perform actions: if you are on demi-point in ballet and you want to stay up there longer, exhale (2). And there is *Perceptual Breathing*, where one accompanies one's breath without interfering; lingering half way between consciousness and unconsciousness (3).

...exhaling...

In the making process of choreographies that I produced between 2008 and 2015, *Perceptual Breathing* was used as a warm- up to perform the minimal choreographies I developed back then with liveliness.

By liveliness I refer to what philosopher Brian Massumi calls "sense of aliveness" (Massumi 2002, 36) as "continuous nonconscious self-perception" (Massumi 2002, 36). Liveliness as "a sense of aliveness" calls for affect and affective relationality with 'Others'. To affect and be affected by 'Others' entails and produces empathy. Empathy usually is thought of in terms of similarity: I need to recognize something in the 'Other' to create an empathetic behaviour, reaction. The seeking out of similarities may erase differences. A heightened awareness of one's breath produces a space to cultivate differences and yet be able to engage in empathetic relations: each performer appears in its radical singularity because each breathing rhythm is singular and because each is anchored in one's bodily somatic singularity, responsible caring is possible.

Breathing is a sensuous-experiential way for acknowledging differences between people. Each person has a different lung capacity. And the lung capacity defines the breathing rhythm of each person. Rhythm is, according to the French poet, linguist and translator Henri

Meschonic, a phenomenon where sense and form, content and form are interdependent. According to Meschnoic's idea of linguistics, poetry and translation, rhythm articulates the sense of speech (Lösener 2006).

In the context of body-based art practice, rhythm, in my view, articulates the pre-linguistic bodily sense so that stillness and not-doing are already entangled in a process of sense-making through breathing. The sense that emerges then is in the first place one of location, a sense of situatedness.

...breath silence...

Side note 2 on *Perceptual Breathing*:

Ilse Middendorf's breath work has to be looked at in a historical context in order to understand better its particularity and its influences. Middendorf's search for another way of breathing is embedded in a general cultural shift at the turn of the 20th century in Europe. Practitioners from the field of art, pedagogy and psychology discussed and experimented with concerns relating to what it means to be human. Freud's psychoanalyses and a new conception of self were debated and there were seemingly inextricable artistic, pedagogical reform movements (e.g. the Monte Verità in Ascona Italy, the movement choirs of Laban, the work on rhythm of Jaques Dalcroze). In regards to dance, Ausdruckstanz with e.g. Duncan or Wigman emerged. Ilse Middendorf's interest in breath is part of the rise of somatic movement practices with e.g. the somatically thinking Elisa Gindler. Gindler and many others experimented with the body-mind connection by putting an emphasis on "conscious

awareness” (Eddy 2016: 66).

Ilse Middendorf studied the new body-mind through gymnastics. She was trained in the Dora Menzler method that combined yoga and gymnastics (Eddy 2016). Middendorf herself remembers her studies of the Menzler Method in the following manner: “I studied the Menzler Method which is based on very good internal sensing and movement”¹. (Johnson 1995, 68). I speculate, that it was the integration of yoga into gymnastics that introduced the internal focus when practicing gymnastics, which introduced Middendorf to a more holistic idea of the body. After having finished her professional gymnastics studies, Middendorf taught gymnastics while studying the Tibetan breath system Mastanang, with its particular exercises. She realized quickly that she wanted to focus on breath rather than gymnastics, and continued studying with breath therapist Klara Schlaffhorst (1863 – 1945) and Hedwig Andersen (1866 – 1957). Schlaffhorst and Andersen had opened a school for breath in Baden-Baden in Southern Germany where Elisa Gindler also studied, among others.

...inhaling....

I tried previously, during my doctorate, to develop an idea of choreography where sitting, breathing and seeing anything at all would be a situation where choreography begins and ends. I placed perception and experience in the very midst of choreography in a way that choreography and perception became congruent. I had, without finding the words for it back then, started the process of shifting from a movement and dance related understanding of choreography to a way of thinking about choreography in relation to performance. Choreography turned into a “performance of living” (Kaprow 1993, 196).

Allan Kaprow develops in “Performing Life” (1979) his idea of doing life: performing the everyday rather than putting the everyday in the particular frame of theatre, dance, painting etc.

In relation to Kaprow’s breathing, he asks:

“What is it that breathes? Lungs? The metaphysical me? A crowd at the ball game? The ground giving out smells in spring? Coal gas in the mines?” (Kaprow 1993, 196).

And he answers in a subsequent paragraph:

“These are thoughts about consciousness of breathing. Such consciousness of what we do and feel each day, its relation to others’ experience and to nature around us, becomes a real way of the performance of living.” (Kaprow 1993, 196).

...exhaling...

Discussing choreography as a “performance of living” (Kaprow 1993, 196) leans onto my interest in questioning display, visibility and productivity in contemporary choreography. There is no outside eye or witness to perform the choreography if it is a performance of living. Choreography is then not a performing arts practice that results in a visible tangible piece that will be presented in a clear frame (black box, white cube, site-specific location) but rather choreography as “performance of living” (Kaprow 1993, 196) turns into a practice of attention. Breath awareness is, for Kaprow, fundamental for a “performance of living” (Kaprow 1993, 196), which it is ultimately also for choreography as a “performance of living” (Kaprow 1993, 196).

When using the concept of attention, I refer to the conversation between Isabelle Stengers and Martin Savransky where Stengers lays out why it is important to pay attention. In the conversation Stengers says that there is no preset answer to the question of “to what should we pay attention? And with what consequences? What are the dangers?” (Stengers 2018, 135). Paying attention does then entail choice taking, taking a stance, positioning oneself through the paying of attention. It is a matter of stepping up and taking responsibility which in return offers a shift in the experience of one’s self. Attention is a complex process of reacting that asks us to slow down in order to even let one’s attention to be caught. It is a practice in giving up control, in deviating from the track one was on. Stengers notes: “Paying attention means slowing down and accepting that intrusive interstices open up even in the midst of an urgency.” (Stengers 2018, 135).

Breathing is a way to practice giving attention not only to myself but also to ‘Others’ when “even in the midst of an urgency” something outside of this situation calls my attention away. It would be easy to now jump to fast conclusions about how breathing differently can change the world, how if ‘we’ just all breath more consciously, the current global eco-socio-political difficulties would disappear. But, in my view, breathing as a way to practice attention can only affect micro-politics.

At the same time, when breath is thought of as a structural phenomenon, breath and politics are interdependent. The murder of the African American Eric Garner in 2014 or Georg Floyd in 2020 are just some of the examples of how a state can use breath as a means of oppressing and killing those that a racist government would not like to have as its citizens.

...breath silence...

In the field of contemporary choreography, breath is not discussed much in the particular context of expanded choreography. In Bojana Cvejic's publication "Choreographing Problems" (2016) Bojana Cvejic addresses breath only as a relevant parameter for making in the context of modern dance where breath was used to structure movement phrases, e.g. through bracketing breath.

Modernity and its linear understanding of time have been critically looked at through the era of post-modern dance artists like Yvonne Rainer, Robert Morris, Trisha Brown, and Steve Paxton etc. Questioning modernity has taken place in dance and performance mainly by questioning modernist ideas of temporality with its imperative of movement and speed and sense of linear progression. In Paxton's piece "Magnesium" (1972) performed at the Grand Union residency at Oberlin College, there are 11 men continuously moving and only towards the end standing still for few minutes. The standing still was then not about where to fix positions but a place for experiencing the perceptual shift that has occurred within the performer. Standing still opened the situation for a variety of temporalities.

Performance scholar André Lepecki ponders stillness in relation to dance in his book "Exhausting Dance" (2006) when he refers to anthropologist Nadia Sermetakis' concept of a still-act. A still-act describes "a moment when a subject interrupts historical flow and *practices* historical interrogation." (Lepecki 2006, 15).

In 2019, 13 years later after the publication of "Exhausting Dance", the publication "Aesthetics of Standstill" (Görling et al. , 2019) interrogates stillness as a way to rethink the modernist time economy and yet, different from Lepecki's account of a still-act and its political relevance in the process of exhausting (dance) movement, the more recent publication looks at standstill through latency in regards to various art forms. "According to our thesis the present becomes divided in scenes of standstill: processes and patterns loose their sense of naturalness, (...) In the other direction, the malleability of the latent becomes available to experience through a charging of the present." (Görling et al. 2019, 6). Interrogating stillness not only in the performing arts, as it is the case with Lepecki, but also in the visual arts, gives insight into how visuality is affected by stillness and the not-yet. Stillness is then an effect of the breaking down of 'taken for granted' visual patterns. Movement is then not aimed at being exhausted but rather to be studied as a deconstructive force for a new aesthetics.

...inhaling...

Is stillness, suspense, latency a matter of privilege? Whose privilege? When looking at stillness, and rather, not-moving within racist violations, the person under threat repeating “I can’t breath” is clearly not in a place of wanting to experience stillness in its latency. In this concrete example, movement and breathing is a life-saving necessity.

This fast shift from one context to another signals how one idea might be productive in one situation but not in another situation. Or differently put: concepts are always contextual – as one can see when reading the subsequent words of Nadia Sermetakis on stillness and breathing where Sermetakis describes stillness as an emancipatory gesture for those who are oppressed that frees one-self from suffocation.

“Stillness is the moment when the buried, the discarded and the forgotten escape to the social surface of awareness like life-supporting oxygen. It is the moment of exit from historical dust” (Lepecki 2006, 15).

...exhaling...

Side note 3 on *Perceptual Breathing*:

Klara Schlawffhorst and Hedwig Andersen turned to breath because they had both breath and speech disturbances. They aimed at solving these troubles by engaging with the breath work

of Leo Kofler (1937-1908) and picked up on the main ideas of Kofler's book "The Art of Breathing as the basis for Tone-Production" (1898). The Schlaffhorst-Andersen method is clearly aim-oriented since their movement is always practiced in accordance with the threefold breath movement (inhale, exhale, silence). Later, Ilse Middendorf met the Dutch breath therapist Cornelis Veening (1895- 1975). Veening had developed a breath work that focused on the sensing of breath and its flow. Veening was also much influenced by his studies of C.G.Jung's analytical psychology. Middendorf picked up on Veening's idea of breath in relation to sensation and the interest in C.G. Jung when starting to develop her own breathing practice. Also, Middendorf continued Veening's hands-on work that he had developed. In 1965, Ilse Middendorf founded the Institute of Perceptual Breathing in Berlin where she disseminated her way of thinking and doing breathing until her death in 2009.

There is little knowledge about Middendorf's Breathwork in contemporary dance. However, one of the founding members of Tanzfabrik Berlin, Claudia Feest, who is also a Middendorf practitioner and has taught classes in movement and Middendorf breath work at e.g. the Inter-University Center of Dance Berlin. In a phone conversation in May 2020, Claudia Feest explained to me how she often has to remind students to not work in breathing with a prefixed image but to breathe without visualisation.

...breath silence...

Side note as end note:

There is always pressure in "performance capitalism" (Manchev 2014, 49)
because competition is at capitalism's core.

To breath within the hunt, the raise, is a virtue that needs to be protected.
To say, speaking with the publication “Tell Them I Said No” (Herbert 2016) is maybe not
producing an end of “performance capitalism” (Manchev 2014, 49)
(it definitely is not)
but it carries with it the potential to create another space.
Sensing stillness and its latency is a way to resist the constant commodification of self, space
and time that is predominantly ruling all aspects of life (including art and culture) in current
late-capitalism.
Breathing is a somatic process that can keep that latency in place.

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