

this could be us

a deep dive into the creative process

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this could be us. Photo: Alex Hautamäki

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<p>This thesis generates discourse around <i>this could be us</i>, situating its creative process within broader choreographic discourses. Structured in three acts - framed by an Overture and a final outlook - the text progressively approaches the staged choreographic work through layers of contextual references, theoretical framing, and critical reflection on the making process.</p> <p>A central focus is given to ballet as a material, re-appropriated beyond its traditional disciplinary canon into the spaces of contemporary choreography (examining both my work and selected references: Forsythe, Holzinger, Gribaudi). Within these frames, the writing later reflects on how plurality and embodied agency can emerge as structuring elements of choreographic work. Contextually, angles of feminist theory offer a second framework of analysis to illuminate my choreographic practice: drawing from Judith Butler, Sara Ahmed, and contemporary reflections on comradeship, the writing frames the studio as a gendered space and considers the links between choreographic thinking and orientation. Upon having paved a landscape around the creation, attention is also given to compositional, relational, and group-making strategies, and the overall dramaturgy of the staged performance.</p> <p>Altogether, this thesis offers a situated contribution to conversations in dance and choreography from the perspective of the maker. It extends the choreographic process into writing, positioning choreographic creation as a site of experimentation and proposing a deep dive through which an embodied process can articulate itself from within into a written landscape.</p>	
KEYWORDS Choreography, dance, ballet, subtraction, performance, female-identifying, agency, soft skills, relationality, difference	

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INTRODUCTION

This thesis draws a landscape getting closer and closer to the work. It starts with an Overture, in which I outline who is writing and try to contextualize what I further discuss through some biographical notes. My choreographic interests are subsequently organized in three parts.

In the First Act, I unpack ballet: opening with a tentative definition, I foreground the perspectives of two historians: Anna Leon (1.1.1) and Hanna Järvinen (1.1.2). I further discuss ballet through the lens of interest in my work: ballet as a physical material (1.2), subtraction as a tool to engage with ballet (1.3), hyperreferentialism and working with difference (1.4). Within each of these subchapters, I open a bracket to discuss the work of a selected artist: William Forsythe, Florentina Holzinger, and Silvia Gribaudo.

In the Second Act, I engage with theoretical frameworks from feminist theory, examining my choreographic work and inclinations through the lens of gender. I circumscribe within my work the following notions: woman through the writing of Judith Butler (2.1), the studio space as gendered space, reading Sara Ahmed's concept of orientation (2.2), and comradeship as a choreographic strategy, as foregrounded by Frida Sandström and Kasia Wolinska (2.3).

As a segway to the latter, moving into the Third Act - the one dedicated to other makers - I bring forth a selection of three strategies I activated in my making process. In *Setting the conditions: contexts, frames, margins* (3.1) I discuss some aspects of pre-production and stage design. In *Empowering dance and working with soft skills* (3.2) I share some insight in how I worked with the dancers. *Primitive hypertext as a compositional tool* (3.3) discusses one strategy I found to deal with different materials in composing.

My intention with *Talk from within the theater* is to provide an additional viewpoint to the work, a deep dive in which all the underpinnings of the previous writing can reveal themselves in the performance. To conclude, I share outlooks on my making as of today, tracing a tentative future trajectory.

OVERTURE: WHO IS WRITING

This first chapter serves as an overture, an opening - as in the ballets. The overture in a ballet sets the atmospheric tone and might introduce motifs that later reappear in different sections of the performance. I love dance performances with many beginnings: I enjoy starting anew so much that my work for stage often has at least two if not three beginnings. This text is not so different: it consists of various *entrée sur scène*. Each chapter is like the act of a ballet: it is something done and performed, intertwined with the previous and the following ones, and always only a part of the whole play

It was worthwhile to open this text by contextualizing some of myself. For the purpose of this writing, I thought it was particularly meaningful not to overlook that I identify as a woman: I am aware that *woman* is a complex notion¹. Maybe, perhaps because it is a complex notion I am particularly interested in it. Throughout this text, I will extensively use this term, and related notions of *femininity* and *womanhood* because it is a descriptive terminology and a relevant subject to discuss my work. My use of gender-related wording in this writing is not an assuming and axiomatic one, and is informed by Butler (1990) describing *woman* as “a term in process [...]. As an ongoing discursive practice, it is open to intervention and resignification”, as I will unpack in the dedicated chapter of the second Act.

Over the past years, I have been actively shaping my identity as a choreographer by studying in an MA Choreography program. However, to stay true to my everyday engagements, I spend a lot more time busy with dance in broader terms than in the act of choreographic creation. As a freelance artist, the time and energy dedicated to hands-on choreographic making is connected to the sparse, but intense times of production. There is a disbalance between setting up conditions for being in the studio and the actual making process, as I will discuss further down in the text, in chapter 3.1. Presenting myself as a dance artist appears to me as a broad notion, connected to a

¹ In *this could be us*, as in my previous projects, I worked with other cis-gender women on stage. However, throughout this text, I use female-identifying and woman interchangeably: when discussing gender, I include in my discussion all those who find resonance in this wording - including for instance trans women and other gender non-conforming identities - whose experiences and perspectives contribute to the ongoing expansion and redefinition of these notions.

wider economy that draws some proximities between my choreographic thinking, practicing being on stage (in my own creations and others), as well as facilitating movement practices and community processes for a range of groups - particularly people living with Parkinson's, other physical impairments and cognitive disabilities. As through my work I have navigated different contexts and roles, I see how my practice has been developing *horizontally*, rather than *vertically*. This movement mirrors the nature of my thinking and ultimately shaped the nature of this text.

I was born and raised in Reggio Emilia, a relatively small city with a remarkably well-funded theater season. The city houses Aterballetto, Italy's largest contemporary dance company with a stable ensemble, which the Ministry of Culture appointed in 2022 as the National Choreographic Center. I was privileged to grow up watching the dancers rehearse and perform the repertoire of William Forsythe, Johan Inger, and Mauro Bigonzetti among others. Being immersed in such a scene shaped my relationship with the art form. The authority of the European canon, one that my work is now in dialogue with, has always been very present and in front of me. My love for dance was born by going to the theater, where I witnessed the work of large touring companies performing, most often in unison, on the steep stage of an Italian theater. The choreographic visions that bring me joy tend towards big groups: as I like to think, I make work for young girls who see themselves on grand stages.

My first experience with dance was ballet, which I encountered at the age of 5 and trained consistently until I finished high school, and then continuously throughout my formal professional education as a contemporary dancer in the European context of Zürich University of the Arts. From my perspective, in the early 2000s Italy it was quite common for young girls to ask their parents to put them in ballet school: I was one of many, we started in a class of 25 young girls. I can only now begin drawing conclusions on how impactful this first-ever experience of dance as a gendered space has been: ballet school was, as far as I can remember, my first-ever experience of a place where everyone was around my age and identified as a girl.

Reflecting this back to my choreographic making, I think I always subconsciously aim at holding a space that has a similarity to this first encounter with dance. First thing first, since I started making my own work in 2019, I have always gravitated toward inviting

other female-identifying performers in my age group. Spending time with them is how the urgency of making arose. What started as a political position (the wish to give work to my friends, trained and talented struggling dancers, and pay other women as we are more and have fewer job opportunities), also grew to become a fingerprint of my choreographic making. In my experience in Italy, gender inequality in theater work is still very present and choreography is a male-dominated field². When I was given the space to make choreographic work, I took this responsibility for moving to the foreground a perspective marginalized in dominant discourse. This is nowadays very much of an open and ongoing process: I am interested in spending studio time with other female-identifying dancers, and especially with those who are in their own practice busy questioning what it is to be on stage as a woman and as a performer. I gravitate towards dancers who are willing to give their own embodied response to this question. In this, I go back to the notion of gendered space, which I will ponder more in-depth in chapter 2.2.

Dance school, the place where I spent all weekday afternoons of my childhood and teenage years, was an eventful place for me: dance school was never about ballet only. My memories of dance school extend far beyond those of the classes. Looking back, I vividly sense a tangible feeling of growing up together we had at that time. I see all the mundane time spent between lessons, building kinships, and falling in love (between girls). My experience of dance education has been one that centered on the collective - also for this reason, a queer one. As a matter of fact, however, it is worthwhile noting that I am not drawn to ballet because my firsthand experience of dance education has been all pink and glitter. From an early age, ballet surely came into my life with a lot of pressure on how my body should look and what was it to perform (not as in *move*, as in *exist*) properly and correctly. This is also when my experience as a dancer and my experience as a young woman started to grow closer together.

Ballet gave me my first experience of being a killjoy and I am thankful for my many years in dance school because they made me grow fond of chafing against structures,

² <https://www.amleta.org/chi-siamo/>

Amleta is an artist-founded intersectional feminist association active since 2017. Their work includes exposing workplace abuse and mapping gender gaps in Italian theater leadership. Their 2020–2024 binary statistics shows that 82.1% of theaters are directed by men. While focused on theater, their findings resonate with patterns observable in Italian dance, particularly in programming and leadership.

with strategies I nowadays can go back to in my everyday life - as a woman, as an artist in the field, as a student in the university. But more than anything, in this process I was never alone. I was not the only one hanging from the barre like a koala in first grade, or wearing my thighs over my leotard and nail polish as a teenager. My experience of dance school was one of a space centering *comradery*, not sisterhood, nor friendship, which I will expand on in the dedicated chapter, 2.3.

For me, the creative process becomes thus a pretext to gather around discussions that center *us* (being who is in the room at that very moment, women, dancers, lovers). Choreographing for and with *us* entails engaging with the shifting question of this *us*. I begin this thesis aware that this we-identity deserves further pondering - one of the pursuits at the heart of this writing process. I suggest a usual place to start, the title: *this could be us*. I chose it because the title functions as a dramaturgical object. This object was created by the working group, yet exceeded our individual contributions and remained largely to be discovered within the process of making and performing the piece. The title was already a site of world building (chapter 3.1): the short sentence projects the work into a potential dimension, revealing itself simultaneously present-affirming and future-oriented.

It is thus to note that *this could be us* is not an end but a beginning.



Photos: Alex Hautamäki, left (2025) and Margherita Giuliano, right (2002).

THE FIRST ACT

This first act opens the space of ballet. During the process of making *this could be us*, actual ballet was brought to the studio together with other sourced references I will unpack when I later discuss for instance the notion of primitive hypertext. Engaging with ballet as just one material among many - rather than treating it as the dominant or central form - already initiates a process of decentralization. This approach challenges its historical primacy, and might allow for a reconsideration of its aesthetics and legacies, opening up a space for alternative perspectives to emerge.

However, as a dramaturgical structure, ballet ended up holding quite a prominent weight in the final performed object: opening with the recorded orchestra of *Giselle* overture, and moving on to the appearance of tutus, the piece follows the traditional dramaturgical structure of the *suite*³, and also by performing movement material that leaned at times strongly against ballet. I thought it was worthwhile to re-center ballet in the writing, to better understand my position concerning this heritage, and how I decided to work in its regards.

1.1. Ballet: tentative definitions

Susan Leigh Foster, prominent US-American choreographer and scholar, circumscribes ballet as a movement system defined by a codified vocabulary, hierarchical organization (in the training of dancers and in the aesthetic goals of choreographers), and an overall aesthetic that privileges verticality, lightness, and precision, historically connected to aristocratic practices and theatrical traditions. (Foster 1996)

Summarizing Foster's account paves the way to what I will further discuss in this chapter: her writings highlight the disciplined bodily and social structures that constitute ballet. Her definition unveils a cultural determination, shaped by centuries of tradition.

³ The *suite* is a distilled showcase of consecutive dances, often featuring solos and pas de deux, that highlight the technical virtuosity of the performers. From an audience perspective, it is often one of the iconic peaks of the whole ballet.

But how did these particular qualities—verticality, lightness, precision—become the defining markers of ballet? Ultimately: what are we looking at when we are looking at ballet?

To discuss how Foster’s complex account came to be, I suggest a step back and a shift in posture - from the choreographer to the anthropologist - to focus on how ballet is a product of centuries of European history and bourgeois values. Kealiinohomoku (1970) lifts the argument that it would be “good anthropology” to examine ballet as an ethnic dance form: European aesthetic values are reflected in the long, extended lines of the bodies. Traces of our religious and cultural customs are present in ballets’ recurring themes: marriage (*Giselle*, *La Sylphide*, *Sleeping Beauty*), death through sacrifice (*Giselle*, *Le Sacre du Printemps*) and an afterlife populated by other-than-human creatures (*Giselle*’s Willis and *Bayadere*’s kingdom of the shades), accompanied by enchanted metamorphosis (*Swan Lake*). At the heart of the ballet’s imagery is a specific construction of femininity: the young, innocent and delicate woman whose value is tied to purity and devotion. All of these angles make a point in circumscribing ballet an ethnic art form that expresses European culture and history. As an Italian artist who was raised within the European canon in dance, when I am working with ballet I am aware that I am actively engaging with my own culture and history.

To further inspect ballet as a complex situated and multifaceted phenomenon, I will introduce here two dance historians’ reflections. My reason for looking into this historiographic work is the one of a choreographer who has been busy with Western dance history (*Do not call me a dancer*, 2024) and in this thesis production, with ballet: Leon and Järvinen’s perspectives pave a ground to observe ballet as a phenomenon.

1.1.1 Anna Leon

Anna Leon’s *Expanded Choreographies – Choreographic Histories, Trans-Historical Perspectives Beyond Dance and Human Bodies in Motion* (2022) examines the notion of expanded choreography, with which contemporary artists and scholars have recognized choreographic expansion beyond dance-making. Leon’s publication underpins how looking at ballet also examines choreographic history: in *Part 1: Before*

choreography, expansion, ballet's early history makes a topic for the publication. Unpacking expanded choreography, whose discourse tends to insist on future perspectives, Leon rather circulates between past and present. Through a trans-historical and micro-historical perspective, Leon unpacks the “period during which the term “choreography” was coined, although its use as “dance-making” was not yet in effect“ (Leon 2022, 33). Leon's analysis encompasses Monsieur de Saint-Hubert's *La Manière de composer et faire réussir les ballets* (Paris, 1641), early- 18th-century French ballet master Feuillet's notation, *Choreographie*, and treatises from ballet masters of the Italian Renaissance. Her account underpins how these writings on ballet identify and contain specific conceptions of choreography, “relating contemporary expandedness to historical eras in which currently dominant notions of choreography were absent.” (Leon 2022, 33)

This is interesting to me because Leon's account evidences the centrality of ballet in choreographic history, by looking at how choreography as an expanded notion, from even before the term came into use in the 1990s, is linked to the emergence of ballet in Europe, and particularly France and Italy. Bringing it back to my practice as a maker: Leon's framing allows me to question how the use of ballet I chose both resists and participates in the contemporary expanded notions of choreography. *this could be us* uses ballet as a material to propose a question very much open in my work: whether the examination of choreographic history and choreographic expansion could circulate between past and present, aligning with Leon's trans-historical approach.

1.1.2. Hanna Järvinen

In *A Cultural History of Ballet – Five Centuries of a European Art Form* (2023) Hanna Järvinen dismantles the myth “of centuries of unbroken artistic development” of ballet. Her analysis encompasses early turning points, from the above-mentioned emergence of Feuillet's dance notation practices to Jean-Georges Noverre's *Les Lettres sur la danse et sur les ballets* (1760), a reflection on the relationships between stage and visual arts that addressed the scene as a tableau, a moving picture. As a product of the social hierarchy of the time, the first horseshoe-shaped “Italian” theater auditoriums date back to the 1730s. Their pervasive presence in Italy and central Europe is a testament to ballet's

impact on Western European cultural heritage, and theater culture (that is: the culture of going to the theater, and what is worthy of being presented on such theater stages).

Reflecting on ballet's colonial, heteronormative and sexist legacy, Hanna Järvinen reflects that "the history of dance in the twentieth century has distorted our understanding of who danced, who was valued as a dancer, where dance was performed and for whom." Coming to dance scholarship from the perspective of the historian, I appreciate how Järvinen's reconstructions examine ballet's history in dialogue with the unfolding of its cultural contexts. An example of this is the French Revolution and industrialization's impact on the development of tragic narratives conveyed in "Romantic" ballet, illusions supported by the newly invented stage fog. She also emphasizes how national narratives reinforced the establishment of a global hegemony, such as the history of the Soviet Union contributed to the dissemination of the art form across satellite states, and through emigration, all the way to the Hollywood industry - where the emigrée Russian ballet teacher became a pop-culture stereotype (Järvinen 2023).

Fast-forwarding to nowadays Europe, ballet receives more visibility and funding than any other dance art form, it is the core of many dance educations, and is too often thought of as a neutral foundational art-form, rather than as a corporeal technique. (Järvinen 2023) Ballet pervasiveness in pop culture makes it available as a sourced material: balletcore is an emergent aesthetic in fashion and there is TikTok trends on ballet vocabulary. It is also from this pop, recognisable angle that my interest in ballet grew to be part of my choreographic work.

1.2 Ballet as a physical material

According to dance studies Professor Alessandro Pontremoli - one of Italy's leading dance theoreticians - contemporary "new" dance unfolds in three landscapes: the *museum* one, which preserves classical ballet and its repertoire, a middle ground, and finally a *third landscape* - drawing from Gilles Clement's *Manifeste du Tiers-paysage* (2004) - is a reserve on the margins of a mainstream culture where the forward-thinking production of contemporary works takes place. (Pontremoli 2018)

With *this could be us*, I wanted to question ballet's confinement to the museum landscape, undusting ballet of the museal-like allure that often surrounds it. Rather than discussing it as a preserved tradition, the following subchapters offer a chronological structure to how I worked with ballet in *this could be us*. The chapters thus follow the temporality to which things came to be during the process, as organized through my gaze of today: they lay out a point of observance (ballet as a material, 1.2), discuss a tool I decided to work with (subtraction, 1.3), and move on to the ripples this had on my choreographic work (working with groups and welcoming differences through hyperreferentialism, 1.4). In the discussion, I will look at both my work and the work of selected choreographers (Forsythe, Holzinger, Gribaudi). By looking at other artists who relate to ballet in different ways, I asked myself: how is ballet invited in contemporary choreography and how does it exist in environments of choreographic experimentation?

In *this could be us*, I went to the studio questioning whether ballet could come as first and foremost a physical material, detached from the pedagogical structures that usually frame its transmission to dancers. The goal of examining ballet as a physical material—without immediately invoking the entanglement between its highly codified technique and the structured approach to teaching embedded within it—was a challenge. In the working group of *this could be us*, albeit all professionally trained dancers, we had different degrees of ballet literacy and relationships to it, which I considered an extremely valuable asset to the creation. I doubt I would have engaged in this discourse if it did not include a range of embodied perspectives: it was the nature of the group, with the very presence of differently trained bodies, that pushed me to embark on this exploration. Before we even got to the studio, speculating on introducing ballet to this group had me reflect on how ballet is generally proposed: the introduction of ballet as a physical material is generally through the class, and ballet classes are the primary way to learn about ballet. As I was reading more about ballet pedagogy, I encountered scholars in dance pedagogy, including doctoral research of Salosaari Paula (2001) in Helsinki and Susie Crow (2019) in the UK:

Hugely influential yet rarely publicly visible, the class can therefore be seen as the elephant in the room that shapes ballet's aesthetics as an art form and the attitudes of its practitioners before works ever get to the stage. (Crow 2019, 10)

My interest in ballet surely did not lay in developing its hard skills (mastering the know-how, or the technical capability of one's body) that practicing ballet entails. I could not however overlook this elephant in the room. Ballet pedagogy, as a structured approach to learning, is embedded in institutional frameworks that shape how knowledge of ballet is absorbed and subsequently reproduced. The process of making *this could be us* was stirring towards the opposite direction: I was aiming to facilitate a space where I could test ballet's flexibility as a material, consciously trying to leave out the structured training and the disciplined bodies it demands. As a structuring pattern in the rehearsal context for the working of ballet as material I moved fluidly between critical reflection and doing. Moreover, my approach prioritized the active engagement of the dancers - not as recipients of knowledge, differently than a ballet class - but as independent, active and knowledgeable agents that could reshape, challenge and expand my questions.

1.2.1 Ballet as a physical material in the work of William Forsythe

Operating with ballet as a material, my work joins a long history of artists active in Europe working with ballet and its legacies. The most recognizable contribution to the discourse of ballet as a physical material has been US-American choreographer and artist William Forsythe, whose groundbreaking involvement has been primary to the development of the aesthetic, technical, and conceptual frameworks of post-dramatic ballet. Active since the 1970s until the present day, Forsythe's polyphonic choreographic work spans a wide range of forms: I acknowledge his work on choreographic objects - creations exploring the very nature of choreography as a practice independent from dance - and how Forsythe's work became central to the development of expanded choreography in the dance art of the 21st century. In this outlook, however, I will focus just on his contribution to ballet history.

Earlier, choreographers such as George Balanchine (1904–1983) already activated changes in the physicality of ballet as a bodily practice: the Balanchine vocabulary requires lightness and speed, elongated lines, expressive hands with broken wrists.

(Aaltonen 2023) Balanchine's choreographies prioritized visual and movement composition to musical interpretation. Forsythe distilled this legacy, leaving behind the narrative elements that, according to Susan Leigh Foster (1986, 14-17), provided the plot for Balanchine's ballets. Starting with the historical obligation of a harmonious body and continuous movement, Forsythe's work reconfigures the physicality of ballet expanding the rigid principles of the language. As he shared in a conversation with dance scholar Mark Franko: "I see ballet as a point of departure — it's a body of knowledge, not an ideology." (quoted in Franko 2019)

As a radical deconstructionist, Forsythe's work explodes ballet: dis-assembling, fragmenting, distorting this knowledge, and with it, the bodily movements of the dancers - resulting in subjecting ballet as a language to a post-structuralist analysis. According to Mark Franko (2019):

By calling upon modes of critical theory that have since become recognizable as "post-structuralist," Forsythe asked the audience to become critically aware of how dance functions like a language – or, rather, a code – that could be reengineered as an agent of its own theoretical interpretation rather than display itself as an aesthetic object for the consumption of the connoisseur.

Unlike previous choreographers like Balanchine, Forsythe did not develop his own technique but showed interest in the abilities of trained bodies to produce complex movements. Forsythe approaches ballet as an embodied knowledge, working with highly trained ballet dancers in order to reconfigure the very disciplinary limits of ballet itself. He formalized his choreographic thinking in the form of tools: *Improvisation Technologies*, first published in 1995 (Aaltonen, 2023). This work draws from ballet's orientation and lines paired with a deconstructive reading of Laban's theory of the kinesphere. This body of work on spatial and movement analysis is a testament to how Forsythe was able to infuse intellect into the work of the dancers. I have experienced *Improvisation Technologies* as a student-dancer at the *Zürich ARTof* 2018 summer intensive. The spatial and geometric expansions of the tridimensional body in space required an engagement with my expertise as a mover. *Improvisation Technologies* activated a thinking body - one that catalyzes a process of discovery and constant learning -in a constant dialogue with possibility.

What I find particularly inspiring about Forsythe's many contributions to choreography is the extreme devotion to the micro-articulation and the compositional mastery, which are a constant of both his early (*Steptext*, 1985, *Impressing the Czar*, 1988) and late-career works (such as *A Quiet Evening of Dance*, 2018). More than anything, however: "what becomes clear is that not just language itself but also thinking is what mobilizes Forsythe's project." (Franko, 2019) Forsythe's injection of intellect in ballet has been a watershed in choreographic history, and *Improvisation Technologies* and his legacy rippled through the company into a generation of choreographers of distinctive voices, such as Crystal Pite, Richard Siegal, David Dawson, Brigel Gjoka, and Regina Van Berkel among others.

1.3 Subtraction and ballet as material

Within the studio time of *this could be us*, I tried to imagine ballet in another context than its canonical ones. An important tool for doing that was subtraction. This exercise has however further invited me to reflect on ballet's culture and history: going into the process, I was well aware I was not interested in reinforcing and upholding the pre-conceived structures inherent to the ballet as a hegemonic practice.

As "the more theatrical and codified the field, the easier it is to discern its activity" (Rothfield 2016, 17), the field of ballet offered thus a fertile ground for operating with subtraction, as discussed by Philipa Rothfield in *Choreography and Corporeality: Relay in Motion* (2016, 15):

Neither a critique (a form of judgement) nor a form of representation (a continuation of the language of theater), subtraction constitutes a dynamic interruption which destabilizes the work so as to allow for the emergence of new possibilities.

For instance, I had a sense that subtracting pedagogy could make it possible, within the studio process, to access ballet first and foremost as a physical material. As I opened in the Overture of this written component, the stance through which I look at ballet is the one of a dancer who trained in class from a young age. The centrality of negative

reinforcement in the pedagogy of ballet complicated my relationships to the notions of discipline, merit, and beauty. In Chapter 10 of *Choreography and Corporeality: Relay in Motion* (2016, 165), Elizabeth Dempster writes: “the disciplinary regime of ballet generates effective mechanisms of social control through the activation of a sense of slack or inadequacy”.

The pedagogy of ballet is a carrier of normalizing aesthetic values and authoritarian practices. Working with subtraction destabilizes ballet’s inherent structural issues. Contextualizing now what I have been doing, I tried to subtract a context so that the new could unfold. For this reason, for instance, in the process of *this could be us* we never did a barre, we never used mirrors. Ballet was never taught, it was *performed*: within the process, we shared time in the studio where subtracting pedagogy from ballet allowed us to make space for the new that “arises because the old has become destabilized” (Rothfield 2016, 19).



The movement-based section of *this could be us*. Photo: Alex Hautamäki

Subtraction is, in fact, “an operation that provokes new becomings within the work” (Rothfield 2016, 16): when the pedagogy and inherent feelings within it are subtracted, our own re-engagement with ballet could open to the emergence of multiple potentialities. As a dancer myself, some experiences of this work we shared in the studio were the pleasure of space-taking and embracing the challenge of the mental and

physical labor of the vocabulary. I consider these first-hand findings in line with my wish to go back to proposing ballet as a physical material and a bodily practice.

Discussing subtraction, Rothfield (2016, 17) sets forth the example of Matthew Bourne's *Swan Lake* (1995), a ballet in which the role of the swans, traditionally performed by women, are taken over by a male-identifying cast. Discussing gendered casting as an operation of subtraction offers another entry point into my work and is a segway into the next chapter, in which I will look at Holzinger all-female-identifying choreographic work.

1.3.2 An Example of Subtracting Ballet: Florentina Holzinger's TANZ

Florentina Holzinger's groundbreaking *TANZ* (2019), which I had the pleasure to see in Helsinki for Side Step Festival 2024, opens with the dancers on stage re-enacting a ballet class. The teacher leading the class, Beatrice Cordua, a former ballerina now in her eighties, is instructing the exercises according to the traditional progression. As this whole first act continues, the classroom tumbles in "sylphic reverie in stunts" (the piece's subtitle), which grafts pop culture, trash aesthetic, blood, nudity and a porn producer who films the performance live.

The reference for the creation has been 19th-century, predominantly French, romantic ballet. Anna Leon, who accompanied the process as a historiographic and research advisor, situates Holzinger's research in a context of feminist and gender-theory-informed ballet scholarship. According to Leon's account, "the extensive literature on dance and re-enactment (e.g. Franko 2017) finally points at how contemporary choreographic practices themselves also re-work and re-process dance history." (Leon 2023) Using *TANZ* as a case study for five choreographic strategies through which contemporary dance works reclaim the agency of female dancing bodies:

the diversification of the homogeneous ballet body; the de-essentialization of romantic femininity; the reversal of the male gaze by an all-female group of performers; the development of trans-human, techno-ecological alliances; and

the *détournement* (subversive repurposing) of bourgeois-driven romantic spectacle.

In my reading, Holzinger's operation is subtracting the ballet of its romantic illusions. Examining the normative curation of bodies in ballet history, she is turning to the skill-specificity of the performers: the defiance of gravity - a motif of romantic ballet, such as *La Syphide* - is portrayed by aerialists suspended by the hair or hanging from motorbikes. Holzinger's fairytale shows in-depth research of the flying body, which opens a reflection on the use of prosthetics (not pointe shoes, but hooks being pierced on stage), the infliction of pain in the name of the Art and the logistics behind the stunts that are performed on stage throughout the piece.

As I mentioned, Holzinger's work is interesting for thematic proximity, as it offers an insight into ballet-dancing female bodies. Of her work, I admire what Leon describes as *The De-Essentialization of the Idealized Image of Femininity Staged By Romantic Ballet* (Leon 2023):

Romantic ballerinas had to look ethereal and light to embody largely male-defined aesthetics of fragility relating to storylines placing them on the verge of death, as ghosts and spirits, victims to unhappy endings. [...] Like her nineteenth-century forebear, today's ballerina, an icon of teen youth, athleticism, and anorexic vulnerability, incarnates a feminine ideal defined overwhelmingly by men.

Against a historical and contemporary backdrop of women literally dying on stage to embody ballet's ideals of otherworldliness, Holzinger's work confronts the spectator with a crude and fully incarnated response that doesn't hide the pain, effort, and risk implicated in the construction of the theater spectacle. The stunts in TANZ are responses to the work of the past and to a culture that still nowadays policies female bodies. Holzinger's performers, however, negotiate the form and extent of that effort, exposing the female body on stage as a site of agency, committed to - as she describes for *Why Theatre?* NTGent's publication - "a life in action" (Holzinger 2020). Leon thus proposes "to frame TANZ in feminist ballet history: as an embodied and enacted feminist manifesto about ballet's bodies." (Leon 2023)

1.4 Ballet as material and hyperreferentialism: welcoming differences

In the previous section, I unpacked subtraction as a choreographic strategy that opens ballet to other forms of experience, allowing “a work to become available to other forces which lie beyond the confines of its conventional iteration” (Rothfield 2016, 15). Building on this, I now turn to hyperreferentialism, another notion that surfaced through the making of *this could be us*. In the gaps carved by subtraction, hyperreferentialism works through evoking and reframing.

To “refer” implies making a connection to something that is not present, beyond the undeniable concreteness of the body. Yet how does one do such a thing within a practice of embodiment? When neurological pathways and muscle memory coalesce to perform a movement, is it possible that this movement is also of the performing body, even when the history of the dancer and of the movement are different and the movement is no longer in its “original” context? (Van Assche and Schaffer 2023, 210)

This quote invites a reflection of how movement can be a carrier for references. The question hereby raised - whether a movement can “belong” to a performing body even when distanced from its original lineage - speaks directly to the practice of hyperreferentialism. What follows from this approach is, for instance, that the act of dancing ballet could not be necessarily in continuity with that lineage, but about what it evokes. Landing in a plurality of bodies in the spaces of contemporary choreography, the potential of referencing could allow ballet to circulate differently away from its original context.

In *this could be us* I worked with the possibility of ballet as a material transmissible outside of its traditional pedagogical canon, welcoming the differences of diversely trained bodies. In the process, subtraction allowed ballet to shift from a site of technical expertise to one of shared cultural reference, where the focus moved to what emerged through sustained collective practice. With this approach, I aimed to validate differences within the group of dancers, which could coexist both in the studio work and eventually later in the performance.

Furthermore, my interest in ballet as a material is heightened by its pervasiveness in pop culture, which makes it available as a recognizable material for hyper-referential play. As Van Assche and Schaffer note, in fact, “most people can evoke the movement of a ‘pirouette’ just by saying the word — even if they cannot do one” (2023, 2012). Building on this, the following section turns to the work of Silvia Gribaudi, whose choreographic practice makes strategic use of ballet’s cultural recognizability to dismantle and reimagine its codes, welcoming a diversity of bodies.

1.4.1 Silvia Gribaudi and hyperreferentialism

In *Flexible Performativity: What Contemporary Dancers Do When They Do What They Do* (2023) Van Assche and Schaffer illustrate how the discursive nature of some work expands the possible references beyond the physical abilities, in the corporeal. Italian choreographer Silvia Gribaudi’s *Graces* (2019) is among those cited as they discuss the notion of hyperreferentialism in contemporary dance.

Within the frames of hyperreferentialism, Silvia Gribaudi’s highly discursive choreographic practice has been a long-time reference of mine. Her work foregrounds performer-audience interactions and comic elements to inquire about bodily differences, and questions the concept virtuosity. In relation to the latter, ballet takes center stage in many creations, such as *GRAND JETÉ* (2023), *Peso Piuma* (2020), and *Graces* (2019). To further discuss her choreographic work, I have to mention projects for communities, especially non-professionals and groups of over 60. Working with the transmission of ballet vocabulary through a hyperreferentialist approach - that references the idea of ballet beyond the abilities of the dancers - Gribaudi’s practice undermines what ballet and ballet pedagogy impose on the performing body. Or, perhaps, Gribaudi’s choreographic practice does not only deconstruct a canon but it also mobilizes a space for a plurality of alternative affective economies, inviting permissions to laugh, to play, to be awkward, to feel joyous: ultimately, to resemanticize ballet leveraging the power of its cultural reference.

Van Assche and Schaffer (2023) further elaborate how contemporary performance deals

with the tension between appropriation and embodiment in hyperreferentialism through primarily two strategies: engaging with an embodied practice as fiction (acknowledging that the practice’s focus both does and does not belong to whom embodies it) and “strategies of hinting, of mastering techniques “well enough” to evoke their contexts without allowing the audience to switch to the evaluative grid implied by codified dance techniques” (Van Assche and Schaffer 2023, 211). This notion of “well enough” in relation to ballet is of interest, because it undermines the unattainable goal of perfection ballet entails. In opposition to a culture where ballet is predominantly represented on stage solely by highly trained professionals fitting certain chosen body parameters, what Gribaudi’s and my proposal have in common is ballet as a material available to differently trained bodies who perform this “well enough” that wants to transcend the evaluative implications of the technique.



Performing in a tutu also reinforces the notion of “well enough” to reference ballet.

Vittoria and Julia’s duet. *this could be us*. Photo: Alex Hautamäki

As a choreographer working with groups, transmission has always been a central concern of my choreographic thinking. As I mentioned, it was actually speculating on the transmission of ballet within the context of my choreographic process that offered the chance to problematize ballet in the first place. In *this could be us*, the six performers are invited to engage with ballet as a physical material and an embodied practice regardless of their technical expertise, but relying on a culturally saturated imagery. To give a concrete example of how I worked in the *this could be us* process: I

prompted the dancers to reflect on ‘*what if I could allow this dance to sit in my body comfortably?*’. The what-if clause hereby suggests a glimmer to cultivate a more personal and affectual relationship to the vocabulary of ballet, one that could shift away from external expectations toward an embodied, reflective and self-directed engagement. This shift is not only technical but dramaturgical, and it allows ballet to live and be transformed through the first-hand experiences of the dancers.

To conclude this Act: hyperreferentialism thrives in choreographic practices that welcome and accommodate bodily differences. Echoing the lightness with which Silvia Gribaudo moves sharing her studio practice, which I encountered in several workshops over the last years, was for me a crucial inspiration: lastly, my goal was shifting the focus from how we are dancing ballet - how much in the execution we adhere to the canonical expectations - to the very fact that we *are* dancing ballet. I connect these last reflections to the notion of embodied agency I bring forth in chapter 3.2 through the work of Sara Houston (2024).

THE SECOND ACT

As I opened in the Overture, to this text there is not one origin but several beginnings. This second Act (a wink to Beauvoir's 1949 *The Second Sex*) unlocks a different discursive field, one that continues examining my work through the lens of gender. This reflective process has been activated to articulate what began with one urgency: working with other women on stage.

Female selfhood in my work aligns with the concept of strategic essentialism, developed by postcolonial and feminist theorist Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak. Introduced as a necessary yet temporary tool, strategic essentialism allows marginalized communities to mobilize around a shared identity. In *Can the Subaltern Speak?* (1988) Spivak emphasizes this is a question of strategy rather than ontology. In my choreographic work, centering the notion of *woman* is not an uncritical reproduction of established categories, but rather a deliberate act that seeks to mobilize the notion of *woman* for interventions.

However - as Butler (1990, 142) examines - the feminist "we" is a phantasmatic construction: in the following section I spend some time with conceptual framings. Beginning with reflecting on the notion of woman through Butler's writing, I look at how my account of choreography operates as both a practice of inquiry and a tool for reconfiguration. I then look at the studio space I activate as a gendered space - through Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology* (2007) - and elaborate on choreographing gendered space as both a thematic concern and an ethical stance. To conclude, I examine comradeship as a practical approach and a product of the space I activated.

2.1 Women

As I set forth the term *woman*, I acknowledge the complexity and extensive debates around it. For the purpose of this thesis, I will observe this notion through the work of Judith Butler I introduced in the Overture. In *Gender Trouble* (1990), Butler opens by examining how *woman* has historically functioned as the object of feminism,

foregrounding “the speculative question of whether feminist politics could do without a subject in the category of women” (Butler 1990, 142). Butler dialogues with the work of De Beauvoir and Wittig, among others, to problematize the essentialist understanding of gender:

If there is something right in Beauvoir’s claim that one is not born, but rather *becomes* a woman, it follows that woman itself is a term in process, a becoming, a constructing that cannot rightfully be said to originate or to end. (Butler 1990, 33)

In examining and discussing the evolving notion of woman, I position myself inside, meaning: it is from within that I explore its unfoldings. My choice of using the term - in this thesis and in the studio - is not the re-affirmation of an essentialist stable, self-evident, and naturally-given category, but rather an engagement with it “as an ongoing discursive practice, it is open to intervention and resignification.” (Butler 1990, 33). In my work as a female-identifying dance artist, the body becomes a primary site for exploring this discursivity. Yet, the very pairing of *woman* and *body* raises some questions:

What circumscribes that site as “the female body”? Is “the body” or “the sexed body” the firm foundation on which gender and systems of compulsory sexuality operate? Or is “the body” itself shaped by political forces with strategic interests in keeping that body bounded and constituted by the markers of sex? (Butler 1990, 129)

Focusing on *women*, I approach choreography as a critical practice to inquire about gendered identities. It is thus in the studio that I wish to encounter other dancers who engage with *woman* not as an inherent stable identity but as Butler (1990) describes it: a term in its making. The above-quoted questions Butler (1990) foreground permeate my creative process as a studio-based maker: I envision choreography as a micro-political strategy of holding space to engage with these questions.

This entails, for example, making sure that within the studio time there are designated moments for the performers to discuss the body and more specifically “the sexed body”

(Butler 1990, 129), and their feelings and concerns around performing gender, if they wish to bring them to the group. In the process of making *this could be us*, these collective unpacking processes also helped me navigate my process as a maker, getting to know the plurality of this specific group and the dancers as singular “doers” of gender.



The dancer’s collective notes from week 3 of the creative process were they brought forth their gendered experiences as performers. Photo and edit: Giorgia Lolli.

Butler looks in fact at “gender is a way of “doing” the body” (Salih 2004, 21), examining how gender identities take shape through the *repetition* of bodily acts (Butler 1990, 140). This is at the core of Butler’s definition of gender performativity, which offers a compelling argument to discuss choreographic work: in this sense, the process of making and rehearsing a performance offers meaningful conditions for exploring these concepts, for both choreographers and dancers. *this could be us*, as the epitome of my choreographic work so far, has been a site of inquiry about this very “doing”, the rehearsals of something always in expansion and in the making. Throughout the

process, I prioritized rehearsals more than repetition, trying to allow a certain spaciousness for the dancer's to embrace their own self-directed performativity within their doing. To further this discussion, Butler points at how the rethinking of identity through such frames might enable agency:

Paradoxically, the reconceptualization of identity as an *effect*, that is, as *produced* or *generated*, opens up possibilities of “agency” that are insidiously foreclosed by positions that take identity categories as foundational and fixed. (Butler 1990, 147)

This notion of agency is central to my thinking of choreography. The collective engagement with the notion of woman provides critical material for my choreographic work: it is through encountering others who are busy with this identity that I nurture my own angles creating for and with women. As a choreographer, this demands me to be a present witness to the working group, looking at how their own work as performers informs the process. In retrospect, I recognize how I have always sought to facilitate spaces that prioritize the embodied agency of the female-identifying dancer. Knowing that I share this *in-process-ness* - and particularly, these questions on performativity from within the stage - with collaborators is empowering to me, both as a woman and an artist.

2.2. Orientation and gendered Space

As a choreographer, I am fundamentally oriented towards women.

Approaching my work through this angle, I encountered Sara Ahmed's *Queer Phenomenology: Orientations, Objects, Others*. (2007), in which she critically examines the topic of orientation. Ahmed's interest in orientation is motivated by an interest in *sexual orientation*, with the aim to pose the question of orientation as a phenomenological one in the context of queer studies. Albeit this is not the theme of this chapter, I found the reading related to bodies and space, or *bodies in space*, because “the concept of “orientation” allows us then to rethink the phenomenality of space—that is, how space is dependent on bodily inhabitation.” (Ahmed 2007, 6)

In the opening, through a fruitful literal reading, Ahmed defines orientation as something that shapes “not only how we inhabit space, but how we apprehend this world of shared inhabitation, as well as "who" or "what" we direct our energy and attention towards” (Ahmed 2007, 3). Building on Butler’s notion of gender performativity as something that is bodily enacted in social and physical spaces, Ahmed focuses on how bodies spatially orient.

In Ahmed’s work, spaces are not exterior containers to bodies, but rather unfolding from them: “bodies are submerged, such that they become the space they inhabit”. (Ahmed 2007, 53) Ahmed further describes the affect of inhabitation on space as such:

in taking up space, bodies move through space and are affected by the ‘where’ of that movement. It is through this movement that the surface of spaces as well as bodies takes shape. (Ahmed 2007, 53).

What follows is that, in the action of taking space, bodies and space become mutually related. For this reason, I think it is meaningful to reflect on how my orientation toward working with and making space for female-identifying dancers shapes the dynamics of the workspace I navigate. In many regards, *this could be us* exemplified this: the studio space was one specific gendered space.

Gendered space is not about the identities that inhabit that space, for as Butler points out gender is not an identity. Rather than assuming that culturally saturated gendered aesthetics (pink, ballet and glitter - all very much present in the visual imagery of *this could be us*) determine a gendered space, I argue for a notion of gendered space that is orientation-centered. I would rather look at gender space as a space where gender is interrogated and the gendered space of *this could be us* foregrounded the perspectives of women, grounded in the mutual recognition of gendered experiences.

This doesn’t mean that other identities were not invited: I don’t consider holding gendered space an exclusionary practice. In the working group of *this could be us* we had two male-identifying collaborators. Their presence in the room introduced valuable depth, challenging a self-referential dynamic and opening the space to other perspectives: it declared not a space exclusively for female-identifying identities in an essentialist sense, but another.

Discussing our studio space I activated as a gendered space, Vittoria Caneva (one of the dancers) phrased it “*we* are lit, in the center, on stage - *they* are in the dark”. The simplicity of this quote underscores through spatial dynamics how choreography, as an orientation practice, can redistribute visibility and agency. If orientation is a way to register proximities, my work has been a way to orient toward one another as female-identifying. Choreographing for and with women entails engaging with the question: what happens when the normative (im)balance that ordered our gendered world is challenged or reconfigured? What kind of different questions, social patterns, and kinships are inhabiting this space - and what arises from them for choreography, dance and performance? My choreographic work materializes tentative responses to these questions, which I will continue to deepen in the following chapter through contemporary reflections on comradeship.

2.3 Comradery

Creating nearness between women in a gendered space has been one of the pre-conditions to activate relationships between performers, which then rippled to include the whole working group off-stage as well and perhaps, at time, the audience. As feminist thinking constitutes my entrance point into politics, I have been keen on the notion comradeship I encountered in the writing of Frida Sandström and Kasia Wolinska. In *Awakening the bodily situation* (n.d.), they raise it as a choreographic strategy of making and holding space.

In the specific case of *this could be us*, I worked with a group of five dancers: two freelance performers from Italy, Vittoria Caneva and Elena Grappi, and three BA Dance students, Ronja Antikainen, Julia Mäkelä and Anna Saves, who gathered in the studio together for the first time only three and a half weeks before the premiere. In Sandström and Wolinska’s work the notion of comrade is leaning against the dancer’s identity. Crucial to the development of my work was to implement different modalities so that they could, within and during the work, recognize each other in the way that Sandström and Wolinska describe: in a shared space, such as in our case the studio and later the space of performance, comrades recognize each other as a “carrier of expectations for action.” (Dean 2019, 10) The latter notion, especially reading it through the lens of

activating such relationships between performers, appears to me inherently choreographic.

As I previously opened in the Act discussing ballet, I go back to the notion of practice-led methodology. I discovered comradeship first by having my hands in the making, and I was driven to it because it appeared as something impossible to instruct and to perform. The theoretical text I quoted above came in later and this process reflects my overall making strategy: first I do, then I contextualize. I worked the notion of comradeship with a practical trial and error approach: I continued stacking experiences with the group until the time we shared, in the studio and outside, started to feel thick enough. A strategy that I pragmatically and systematically recurred to is proposing working with a common mission, games, mischief and holding secrets. The performance came to be mostly with task-based material, so that this space for emerging kinships is embedded in the composition.



A clear choreographic manifestation of comradeship is the dancers' first appearance on stage: Anna and Julia come in together, with the mission of setting up the space for the performance. *this could be us*. Photo: Alex Hautamäki

Moreover, I found myself in a very particular position being both the director and one of the dancers. Redundantly repeating sentences like “*it’s just dance*”, not only I wanted to invite a lighter working environment where silliness is welcomed, but I also suggested possibilities for the dancers (as a group) to make fun of my proposals. Making fun of the director (one iteration of chafing against someone) has proven to be an effective tool to develop forms of comradeship: “when we call ourselves comrades, we are saying that we are on the same side” (Dean 2019), as in: the side of this work we are making, and ultimately, the one of dance. One more reflection comradeship invites is the one concerning the audience: does the spectator become a complicit (yet separate from the performers) witness or are they invited to the space to become comrades? These questions are still very much open in my making.

However, I am interested in raising comradeship as a strong opposing terminology to friendship or sisterhood, which describe (emotional) bonds. In Sandström and Wolinska’s work the notion of comradeship is introduced as a figure of socio-political belonging, and the product of working together: its nature is thus not rooted in a feeling but an action projected in the public sphere. Following on this, the dancer is hereby recognised as a political subject, thus “reclaiming dance’s space in the sphere of socio-political urgency”. (Sandström and Wolinska 2019)

Both the works of Sandström and Wolinska and Dean offer meaningful insight to think of the studio space as a political space. The proximity of the terms dance and comradeship is something I connect very much to my experience of dance and dance education. By formulating and acting within that space, dancers become agents inside of the work itself:

“what follows is the emergence of the space of dance (and of comradeship) understood as the experimentation in recovering the world in common by acting choreographically upon relations that demand recomposition as reparation”
(Sandström and Wolinska n.d.)

such as the one with ballet, the one with being gazed, the one negotiating performing gender. Through comradeship in performing together, I encountered a perspective of the collective that challenges individualism and unanimity (Dean 2019), and that can consolidate the creative process as a space to meet our recompositions in the making. Reflecting on this understanding of choreography as world-making lays the groundwork for the following chapter, 3.1.

THE THIRD ACT

As a maker, I do not start by paving the conceptual grounds to my work, but I rather trust a doing that is responsive, and constantly reflecting on itself. This position requires a constant back and forth between practice and context-dependent discourses, and is reflected in the tools I employ - that prioritize bodily knowledge and lived experience, rather than working with concepts through abstraction.

This Third Act provides an angles through which I open up some strategies I used in the studio, and continuous reflections that sprung from spending time with these strategies. As this primarily catered to other makers, I also focus on a more discursive use of language and embed references that bleed outside the Academic context.

3.1 Setting the conditions: contexts, frames, margins

Defining *the choreographic* is the task of a lifetime. But as of right now, I think of it as very much involving the work of making and holding context. This grew to include all the underworld of building conditions for my work: finding finances, allyships, places, people to make the work feasible. Working with understanding the conditions and designing my own livelihood inside of them has led me to take into my thinking of choreography the basics of production. Or, better, I think of production as choreography, in a broader sense, and struggle to draw a line in the continuum between production (the macro choreography) and my studio work (the micro choreography). In the neoliberal freelance ecosystem I move in, learning how to shift in this micro/macro has been an incredible survival strategy. This frame of thought also helped me to think of my studio work as embedded in a broader societal context, where I could develop and make use of my choreographic skills in different ways.

When gathering the working group for *this could be us*, I was guided by bringing together collaborators from all contexts I have been active in, in Finland and Italy - some recent encounters and some dancers that I have been working with since the

beginning of my journey as a maker. Applying choreographic and creative tools to production has given me chances, such as involving freelancer dancers from abroad in my artistic part. We gained the support of the Italian Cultural Institute in Helsinki, Bologna-based production house Nexus Factory, Culture Moves Europe mobility funding. Further applications have been Finnish Cultural Foundation, Frame Finland, Movin'Up - Giovani Artisti Italiani. Assessing, planning, and communicating the project to possible partners has been a way to weave in possibilities for this work to materialize.

The second iteration of the notion of *context* that presented itself was the idea of building the set up. I am a choreographer who relies on a heightened sense of visuality: for me to imagine the scene, it was crucial to define as much as possible of the space before going into production. As an artist active in Italy, deeply engaged with the European cultural canon and pragmatically limited by the technical resources I worked with, all of my creations have always been performed with frontal seating, which is the one that is always built-in across the majority of Italian theaters. In my ACO piece, *my sacrum is the head of a lion (and I have proof of it)* (2024), I started working with a two-sided audience, which I felt I had not fulfilled exploring. When pre-planning the work with the light and costume designer we worked very much towards the question of designing a world. Alex Hautamäki, the light designer, took over most of the stage designing work. Although in this pre-planning phase I worked with the designers individually - a sense of coherence started to gather itself around vibrant and saturated colors in both the costumes and space design.

To my proposal of a two-sided stage, Alex lifted the idea to work with two cyclorama projector screens, which ultimately ended up being the most part of the stage design together with a pink dance carpet. On the opposite sides, the space we were designing was framed by the presence of the audience, 65 seats, designing a corner. I was inspired by the idea of building a box inside of a box (the theater), inside of a box (the university).



First rendering of the Theater Hall set-up. Credit: Alex Hautamäki



Costume (color and pattern) moodboard. Credit: Eva-Liis Lidenburg

Framing, as an action of defining rather geometrical and muscular frames for the space, was setting up conditions for me to think of this box as a room, inside of which actions could unfold as world building activities. According to Leslie Kern, author of *Feminist City* (2020), world building:

includes creative, disruptive, utopian, and even failed performances, practices, relationships and imaginings that not only challenge structures but that map queer, insurgent, other worlds beyond the already existing charted pathways.

From these early moments before stepping into production, choreography presented itself as a flirt with an *otherwise*, tending towards a world that doesn't exist. I position world-building as an exercise of political imagination that entails many questions: how can the space of creation become a potential space of possibility, for us - on every side, performers and audiences - to experience things to unfold otherwise? In these worlds, what do we decide to give space to, or what do we want to make tangible?



The *this could be us* final set-up. Photo: Alex Hautamäki

Discussing world-building in *Dancing at the Edge of the World: Thoughts on Words, Women, Places* (1989), the acclaimed US-American fiction writer Ursula K. Le Guin writes:

To make a new world you start with an old one, certainly. To find a world, maybe you have to have lost one. Maybe you have to be lost. The dance of renewal, the dance that made the world, was always danced here at the edge of things, on the brink, on the foggy coast. (Le Guin 1989, 46)

The idea of framing further materialized in a black dance carpet, a *space between*, one more character of the staging that added layers to its world-building potential. This margin (side tasks) functioned as a liminal space between the space of performance (main task) and the one of the audience. Mostly unlit and self-choreographed - or, handed to the emergent imaginings of the performers, it sat as a part of the whole but outside the main body (Hooks 1984). Alex's set up proposals also fell into my hands at the moment when I was asking myself often what is it to *frame* dance. Framing in a broader and conceptual sense, as in: building a context for dance to exist and to flourish. The final space looks like a room, architecturally shaped but rather domestic. This preserves the idea of an own space, perhaps a living-room-like environment, that the audience is invited in. For me, this is closely related to the idea of theater as a voyeuristic experience, where the spectator is looking at private moments and positioned as a distanced and seated observer.

Actions that take place in this marginal space of radical possibility de-centralize the gaze of the audience. We sought actions that could dramaturgically strengthen the main choreographic image. Personally, I find it particularly empowering how my presence as a performer can support another to embrace their own decision in front of an audience with less scrutiny and more support. From this marginal space, witnessing between performers, as also a product of comradeship between them, emerged during the process as a strategy of holding space for one another.



Working with the gaze as another frame: Ronja's role in part of the performance is the one of a gaze companion, guiding the audience through the performance, at times indicating focus points, at times layering additional narratives to the scene.

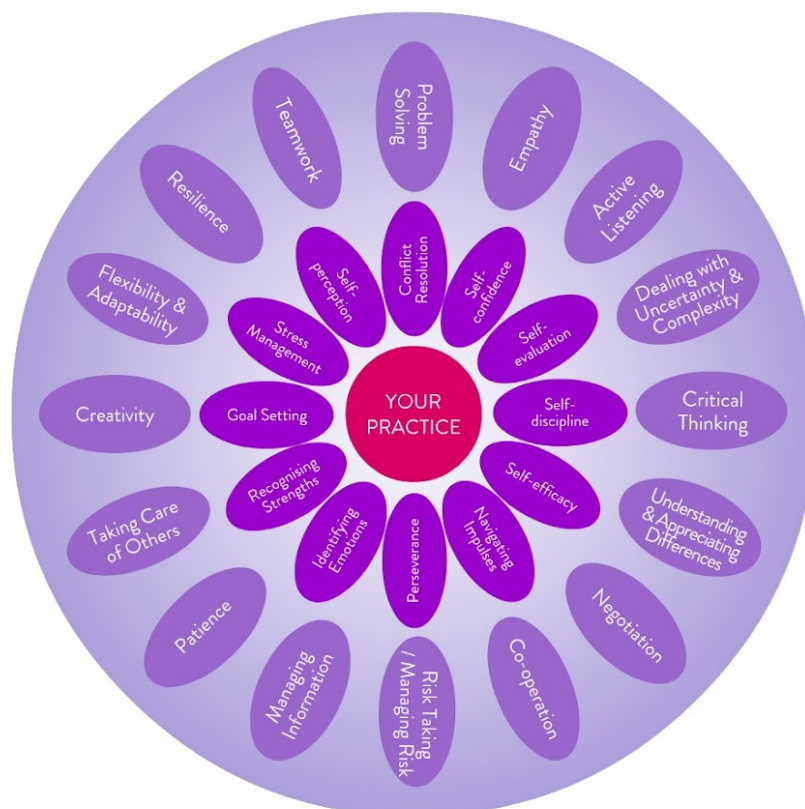
this could be us. Photo: Alex Hautamäki

3.2 Empowering dance and working with soft skills

Soft skills, hardly recognized in dance practice and scholarship (Houston 2024), encompass thought and communication patterns that enable interpersonal relationships to thrive while supporting the navigation of personal emotions. *Empowering Dance – The Soft Skills Teaching and Learning Approach* is a 2020-23 Erasmus+ programme funded by the European Commission, that has investigated the articulation of soft skills in dance. One outcome of the project has been an industry-oriented guidebook, co-authored by scholar Sara Houston and dramaturg Monica Gillette, together with the project partner institutions⁴.

⁴ Kampnagel/K3 Tanzplan Hamburg, La Briqueterie CDCN Val de Marne, CSC Bassano del Grappa, Dansateliers Rotterdam, University of Roehampton London, Croatian Institute for Movement and Dance Zagreb, University of Zagreb.

MAP OF SOFT SKILLS



The soft skills compass is one of the tools presented in the *Empowering Dance* (2023) guidebook. Soft skills are hereby organized between introspective (inner circle) and inter-relational (outer circle).

Reflecting this back to *this could be us*: we worked with task-based improvisation and instant composition. Within the process, I supported the dancer's activation with invitations such as: '*look at what is happening in the space - what is the dance we are dancing - you already know the choreography*', facilitating a space to access and practice soft skills. Such skills notably emerge and grow through the body, in space, encountering the alterity: dancing.

To continue with an example: the introduction of ballet as a material and subtraction - which I discussed in chapter 1.4 - engaged a range of the dancers' skills, including *risk-taking*, *managing information*, and *critical thinking* on my proposal. The guidebook supported me in naming them and I think it is noteworthy to look at how I am listing

mainly skills from the compass' outer circle, the ones that are activated in the sphere of the interpersonal. The compass, thus, encouraged me as a maker to explicit how my proposal of ballet as a material is exiting the logic of ballet's traditional first-person embodiment.

Spending time with dance—and with the possibility of *empowering dance*, borrowing from the European project title—was a central priority in this thesis production. Through the above-mentioned activation, my choreographic interest was to develop personal and collective strategies to navigate spending studio time together as people who never met in this constellation. The *Empowering Dance* guidebook (2023) further evidences how “the embracing of bodily difference is enacted through” among others “the pleasure in dancing together.” As a choreographer, I supported this by encouraging the dancers to gravitate toward movements and decisions that were joyful, pleasurable, or of interest for them. This also invited a broader reflection on how these differences could be integrated as a richness woven into the choreography.

Another way that we practice soft skills in the group (*teamwork, critical thinking, active listening, dealing with uncertainty and complexity, managing information, and identifying emotions* among others) has been asking the dancers to unpack together their subjective and collective experiences of my proposals, noting specific keywords that have been lingering in the room. In the framework of this collective note-making, dancers are asked to be the active agents that propose a cartography of what they see occur in the room. During this time, I keep track of who remembers what more vividly, looking for hints about what kind of effect my different propositions had. I use this information as guidance to develop subsequent frameworks of task-giving and material-shaping that respond to their kinships. As a choreographer, I negotiate tools to work with them in ways that I think could attune to their singularities, as individuals and in constellations: *recognizing strengths* and *appreciating differences*.

My work as a choreographer is looking at setting conditions - within the creative process, and eventually the stage - for the dancers to engage with negotiations, exercising their own agency as a product of often much self-directed performativity. These reflections on the access and activation of different trained bodies and the negotiation of differences offer a segway into introducing another central notion to the

research of Houston: embodied agency, which she is further discussing in the article *Embodied agency through soft skills development in dance* (2024). As a starting point for thinking about it she takes Noland's definition, according to who embodiment is:

the process whereby collective behaviors and beliefs, acquired through acculturation, are rendered individual and "lived" at the level of the body. Agency it follows, is the power to alter those acquired behaviors and beliefs for purposes that may be reactive (resistant) or collaborative (innovative) in kind . (Noland 2009, 8-9)

Houston claims that "embodied agency is not just about mastery of movement, but about important relational skills that are embodied and practiced through dancing" (Houston 2024). Through this quote, I go back to ballet (and dance) as both a material to use and an embodied practice to engage in together, negotiating differences. The physical-knowing-through-doing approach I recurred to in *this could be us* prioritized a knowledge deeply rooted into the embodied agency of the dancers.

3.3 Primitive hypertext as a compositional tool

In the making of this written component, I encountered Octavia Butler's (1998) notion of primitive hypertext:

I generally have four or five books open around the house--I live alone; I can do this--and they are not books on the same subject. They don't relate to each other in any particular way, and the ideas they present bounce off one another. And I like this effect. I also listen to audio-books, and I'll go out for my morning walk with tapes from two very different audio-books, and let those ideas bounce off each other, simmer, reproduce in some odd way, so that I come up with ideas that I might not have come up with if I had simply stuck to one book until I was done with it and then gone and picked up another. So, I guess, in that way, I'm using a kind of primitive hypertext. (Butler 1998)

Butler describes how she intermittently moved between materials that relate to each other in no particular way, pointing at a diversity of sources and how these interact with each other in unanticipated ways. I feel this quote and notion are closely relevant to how I have been working: I like to think of the studio space as a space that embraces the coexistence of multiple and different materials, that does not uphold any specific inherent hierarchy between them. Through the process of making *this could be us*, I embraced fully the nature of my thinking, which scatters horizontally in different directions rather than vertically. Within the process, I aim at making the possibility for oblique (queer) and multi-faceted relationships to emerge.

Considering what emerges from primitive hypertext as a strategy for choreography, it might offer an alternative to narrative or core-driven thematic making, encouraging a multi-layered weaving of choreographic threads. This notion also allows one to look at the staged performance as a text that comes with a set of footnotes, where the choreography is flourishing through its indeterminate, non-linear, and undisciplined nature. I look at the creative process as a catalyst for primitive hypertexts between different materials: for instance, during the first week of the process of *this could be us*, ballet as a physical material was introduced to the dancers together with the texts *Awakening the bodily situation* (n.d.) and *Dance of The Future* (2019) by Sandström and Wolinska, discussed in the chapter 2.3. All the range of topics I unpack in this written component were present in the room, simmering, bleeding into one another: primitive hypertext was central given the diversity of interests I wished to bring to the studio. A good image to visualize the creative work is the one of the laptop, where many tabs are open simultaneously. Further along the making process, working in this way led me to fantasize about the possibility of completely different materials encountering one another within my work: Emily Dickinson's poems, the dancing words of Isadora Duncan, the feline photography of Walter Chandoha, the 90s American sit-com *The Nanny*. Some of these references found their own situatedness, for example, the last two have been picked up by the light and costume design respectively. Some more of these primitive hypertexts will be explicated in the next chapter, *Talk from within the theater*.

In short, primitive hypertext is a way of making through relational and intuitive links between materials. Through the lens of primitive hypertextuality, choreography is thus a

relational practice where tangents - and attuning to the intuitions they drift to - are fundamental. I position primitive hypertext as both a conceptual framework and a pragmatic compositional tool. Nurturing the courage to trust this way of composing, especially in the condensed time of productions, has been a learning experience that entangles interdependence, interdisciplinarity and improvisational skills. Diving into primitive hypertexts and making from this awareness has been a way to think of the theater as a responsive extension of broader contemporary thinking.

As a coda to this chapter, I think primitive hypertext as a compositional tool has the potential to make the choreographic work less of an object, and more of a hypertextual entity that can bounce into other, at times incongruous, directions. In *this could be us* the echoes of these primitive hypertextual interactions are trans-historical, cross disciplinary boundaries and often come to be unsituated or fragmented. I ponder on how composition from this place operated in relation to the audience: the spectator is not hyper-performative, not invited to give meaning, but rather as someone with whom to share the many tabs that live open inside of the creation. And in many regards, this written component exemplifies the notion of primitive hypertext I operated with in the studio process: it foregrounds not one discourse, but many, allowing the reader to come closer to the work from different angles: inviting them as comrade in allowing materials to “bounce off each other, simmer, reproduce in some odd way”, in order to “come up with ideas that I might not have come up with if I had simply stuck to one” (Butler, 1998).

TALK FROM WITHIN THE THEATER

this could be us starts with a blue light and a skeleton in flamboyant clothes, alone on stage, waiting for the audience to enter. The skeleton came to be of interest as a reference to the old, the museum, the immobile: a symbol of the dance of the past. A skeleton simultaneously is a body and is not specifically any person's body. If anyone's death is to be referenced, I thought it should be Giselle - yet, why another Giselle?



The audience entrance in *this could be us*. Photo: Alex Hautamäki

In *Perchè ancora Giselle? Dialogo sul balletto perfetto* (2007) Vittoria Ottolenghi, one of the most authoritative voices in Italian dance journalism of the last century, writes:

Giselle è un balletto assolutamente perfetto, è il balletto per antonomasia. Raccontarlo, descriverlo, ritrovarlo e, ancor meglio per i pochi che ne sono capaci, danzarlo, è capire, piano piano, che cosa sia la danza. (Ottolenghi 2007)

Giselle is an absolutely perfect ballet; it is the quintessential ballet. To tell it, to describe it, to find it again and, even better for the few who are able, to dance it, is to understand, little by little, what dance is. (Ottolenghi 2007)

To me, on an affectual level, *Giselle* checked a lot of boxes. The ballet served as a springboard to discuss, in the contemporary, the thematic landscapes I articulated throughout this text. It offered a tragic story-ballet about an idealized and betrayed vision of womanhood. Also, the second act is populated by the Villi, ghost-women coming in flocks that provide death by dancing. *this could be us* started to take its shape from this dramaturgical framework of making only a second act for *Giselle*. If *Giselle* had to be found anywhere, then we needed a skeleton. On the other hand, no one of us being *Giselle*, the white canvas of the creation left space for stories yet to be written - stories of other women. I go here back to discussing the title: *this could be us*, and not *this is us*. The title presents the creation as a speculative gesture, with the aim of sharing partial responsibility for this speculation with the audience. Speculation often materializes as a silhouette: both my solo and the duet with two people in a tutu (Anna and Julia) all elaborate on the choreographic theme of *shadowing*.

The Overture of this text opens with me sharing my love for beginnings: the first ten minutes of *this could be us* are a set of new beginnings. The audience's entrance. *Giselle's* Overture music plays as we see the dancers' shadows appear, warming up behind the curtain. A light transition revealing the actual color of the dance carpet, a solid strawberry pink. The dancers, still partially busy with their gymnastics backstage, coming on stage with a shopping cart, with a project: setting up the stage with bags of popcorn, being as ineffective, quick and as loud as possible. A freeze: they pose.



this could be us. Photo: Alex Hautamäki

All of these hint at a dramaturgy of beginnings, with which I invite the audience to let go of the *one*, the *singular*, the *coherent*, the *conclusive*. These sections also introduce all the core elements to read the piece: ballet's presence, relationships between performers, a space that opens towards audience interaction, and a hyper-feminine aesthetic that at times leans strongly against humour and trash. The real beginning for me, however, is Anna's solo. With Anna, left in the spotlight, it's the first time that there is only a body, and it is a body at work.

Anna is busy with the labour of practicing one movement phrase. The movement material looks like ballet, and was generated by her. This solo is where in the piece we play with the notion of "well enough" and the hyperreferentialist notion (discussed in 1.4): Anna is dancing Anna's idea of ballet. Vittoria joins, and they start to take more freedom within this material: changing directions, working with repetition, and eventually melting into another dance. The choreographic proposal is developed linearly in space and time: it is a loose structure in which the dancers are invited, accumulating one by one, to enter the space. The system of cues and meetings is inviting the dancers to stay with one another and work with what emerges in the space. The rhythm-based musical carpet references the sounds I associate the modern dance classes with live musicians I had during my Bachelor studies. This body-based section presents to the audience bodies at work and represents a big portion of the performance time-wise: taking time was fundamental to enable and witness the spontaneous development of the movement material. As the dancers join, the body shifts: ballet - which as I previously discussed, is presented as the core material through Anna's solo - is less and less looking like ballet. The use of it as a material was already developing another dance that further decentralized the hegemony of ballet on our workgroup's stage. This dance could be looked at - reporting something we raised in the studio - through working with clarity of directions, sending weights into space, or notions of symmetry and asymmetry. Within this process of drifting, the audience can witness the dancers develop their own strategies to access my proposals as different trained bodies and in a structure loose enough to make space for their own personalities.

The exit of the dancers from 'the wing' opens the dramaturgy of what I thought as the suite: duo-solo-duo-solo. With how the space was eventually used, with the dancers

witnessing one another and activating the margins of the dance carpet, the dramaturgy actually bent more towards one of a *scape*, something to be watched with no specific sense of linearity and centrality. From this point of the performance, ballet is also materialized in physical objects. For instance: the entrance of a white tutu, the most symbolic costume of ballet, anticipates an interest in working with objects, which will have its climax in the finale. Pointe shoes, ballet's iconic prosthetic object, are substituted by Crocs slippers. With Julia and Vittoria re-enacting Cinderella's fairytale of shoe-fitting (supported by a dream-like light transition), a space of pop references is unlocked.

This whole central section exemplifies the notion of primitive hypertext as a compositional tool I discussed in chapter 3.3. Ballet is here further de-centralized as a material, and put in dialogue with sounds from meme culture and pop-song fragments recorded in the voice of the dancers. The movement phrases take material from ballet and intertwine it with shakes and wiggles of the lower body. The space of this section is saturated with cultural elements that bounce in different directions, and staging of the movement material supports this by relying heavily on the concept of double: two dancers, two-sided audience - in a play between unison, mirroring, performing at times for one side or the other.



The Cinderella moment in *this could be us*. Photo: Alex Hautamäki

Julia and Vittoria’s duet and Elena’s solo are spatialized using the six Ikea rats soft toys that surround the dance carpet as cardinal points. *Les petits rats* reference the lowest-ranking or younger ballerinas in the corps de ballet of the Paris Opera. We chose the Ikea *GOSIG ROTTA* soft toy, which has been so much an internet phenomenon that the company tried to discontinue it but faced petitions by customers worldwide to bring it back (Reddit 2020), another materialization of pop culture. Stuffed in microphones, these rats enable a dancer-operated interactive sound design that is activated through touch, working with weight, and stomping. Julia and Vittoria, for instance, come in front of one rat and *grand plie* in second position charging for a loud *battu* jump, in *Crocs*: my interest in the contradiction between a heavy physical quality and ballet takes center stage in this duet.



Elena’s cat solo in *this could be us*. Photo: Alex Hautamäki

Elena’s solo movement material was generated by her, prompted to use Emily Dickinson’s cat poem as a choreographic instruction:

She sights a Bird—she chuckles—

She flattens—then she crawls—

She runs without the look of feet—

Her eyes increase to Balls— [...] (Dickinson about 1862)



Details of *Les petits rats* around the stage, in costumes by Eva-Liis Lidenburg.

Photo: Elena Grappi

The long-time choreographic interest of the cat in my work is in *this could be us* developed more in a series of details rather than the overall mimesis: the movement of the tail becomes a foot tapping, and actions of crawling, licking, smelling each other's behinds. I was not interested in the feline emerging clearly as one of the signs in the work, but I was rather interested in finding strategies to slide in the work a specific way of eroticizing bodies that I personally feel connected with the feline itself. And to operate this through minute and sublimated interventions to compose with. Particularly interesting was to work with Eva-Liis at the costume design of the piece. We gathered a mood board that included a selection of animal prints (particularly leopard and tiger) and I shared my interest to work with bells and cat-like collars.

In the opening of *Queer Phenomenology*, Ahmed writes that “to be orientated is also to be turned towards certain objects, those that help us to find our way”. (Ahmed 2007, 1) As an artist, I rely on a sense of heightened visibility and making a creation is often an exercise of aesthetic landscaping. In the book Ahmed offers “an approach to how bodies take shape through tending towards objects that are reachable, that are available within bodily horizon”. (Ahmed 2007, 2) My work largely grows out of the possibilities of gathering and spending time with found *stuff* I like. When describing the early phase of

a new project I always start with naming things that exist in the world of the creation, listing the coordinates of the world to be built.

The finale of *this could be us* exemplifies this: in the scene, movement materials from previous scenes, objects coming in, clothing changes and playful elements are weaved in without any specific hierarchy. Working so extensively with objects was largely possible thanks to the solid one-month period of using the theater space: a space that could become our own, and that could therefore present as a domestic environment, needed its furniture. One day, as we were building the final scene, I brought the inflatable flamingo and prompted the working group ‘*what is missing?*’. A big plant, pink furry handcuffs, a yoga mat: curating the selection of objects we worked with *wishing* and proceeded to build, object by object, a material world for the creation. But also lastly for ourselves, as we join the landscape we build in the final image.



this could be us. Photo: Alex Hautamäki

OUTLOOK

My experience - equally in the MA and in the work I made outside of the university in the past two years - has taught me that learning happens through being in-process, rather than by tracing conclusions. Drawing it back to where I started in the Overture, I feel deeply engaged with the *in-process-ness* that Judith Butler (1990) points at to extend the complexities of gender identification. I transpose this very *in-process-ness* to all my endeavors and concerns, particularly throughout the process of making and writing this thesis work.

Through it, I had the pleasure to encounter a broad range of topics, shaping a specific point of view on ballet and gender that are relevant to my choreographic making. As a result of this intense time of self-reflection, I had the opportunity to acknowledge and sharpen my making strategies and I have gathered my choreographic thinking. I now feel much more self-aware as an artist and knowledgeable of how my idiosyncratic orientation impacts my choreographic vision, what kind of discourses my work and working methods entail, how to pinpoint those with words and, lastly, how to situate myself in the field of choreographic experimentation among other artists. All of these outlooks are living inside of this text.

Subtraction, working with such a major institutionalized dance form as ballet, the strategic essentialist notion of woman, orientation, dancers as comrades (figures of socio-political belonging), and world-building as an exercise of political imagination all contribute to drawing a landscape around the body that is highly discursive and that prepares the ground for the future endeavors of my work as a choreographer.

As a matter of fact, much of my thinking is at the moment oriented towards a future: the future of dance, and the dance of the future, gazing at my past and the heritage of dancers before me. Writing this outlook, as the conclusion of this thesis and my MA studies, I go back to the title of the performance: *this could be us* suggests a conditional clause: this could be us *if, but, or, when*. There is an airiness to the title that is already projected into the new. Looking ahead, my long-term vision is to shape a trajectory for the creation of a project-based company, a fluid entity that could come together in

different constellations. In many ways, the artistic part of this thesis has been a rehearsal for that dream: the creation operated like an orientation device toward a future that does not exist and that we have a chance of making, together.

This thesis investigates choreography as a site of embodied thinking through the creation process of *this could be us*, offering a situated contribution to contemporary choreographic discourse and wishing to ignite further reflection on ways to make, think, and move together. *this could be us* has been a further confirmation that dance and choreography are, for me, always indisputably happening in the sphere of the plural. As I work with *big* - big groups, big concepts - I am aware that my space for learning is limitless. I consider the closure of this MA as another beginning, one that gives me the vertiginous thrill for all the future learning challenges that await in professional life outside of the university.

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