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Spiritual corporeality: towards embodied gnosis through a dancing language

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PART I

Weaving together corporeal language and verbal discourse: history and method

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CHAPTER 1

Circling around the unspeakable:
situating the gap between wordless corporeal language and verbal discourse

In this chapter, I will position the ***dancing language**** that I develop with this research in relation to a historical lineage of dance beginning with modern dance as it emerged during the 20th century. While sketching a brief overview of the contemporary dance landscape, different perspectives on the friction between the non-verbal and the unspeakable in dance and the realm of concepts and language are presented.

The focus of this chapter is to give an impression of how the field of tension between dance and verbal discourse/theory has been dealt with by a limited selection of dance artists during the 20th and 21st century. The temporal scope and depth of this dance historical contextualization is intentionally kept concise. The emphasis lies on introducing my approach to working with this friction in relation to these examples.[35]

I will highlight historical mutations of engaging with the creative space between the non-verbal and the verbal in dance. I will differentiate my vision on ***languaging**** [36] dance as a mediating movement that draws together the metaphysical and the corporeal. I will further elaborate on the notion of ***altered states of knowing**** as a possible foundation for a dance specific form of knowledge based on types of cognition that are not readily graspable by

[35] A historical overview of the development of modern dance and how its relation to the verbally discursive shifts during the transition into post-modern and contemporary dance would require an in-depth dance historical approach and lies beyond the scope of this dissertation. This investigation is situated in the domain of artistic research and hence aims to give more space to develop insight and argumentation from the perspective of a contemporary artistic practice.

[36] To give central importance to verbal and corporeal *languaging* as ways to develop a dance signature and to participate in the evolution of the art of dance is largely indebted to my long-term engagement (since 2005) with the choreographic practice of Emio Greco and Pieter C. Scholten (artistic directors or ICK Dans Amsterdam) as a dancer, dance teacher and dance researcher. In their approach to research on dance (an)notation, documentation and knowledge transfer, initiated Bertha Bermúdez and currently (2023 ongoing) continued by myself, the combination of the spoken and written word with precisely articulated corporeal language to develop, preserve and to transmit dance knowledge is explored extensively and in dialogue with various partners. See for example Magnini, *Inspriation. Emio Greco | Pieter C. Scholten. The Multiplicity of Dance,* 2015, De Lahunta, *(Capturing Intention). Documentation, Analysis and Notation Research Based on the Work of Emio Greco |PC*, 2007 and De Lahunta "Language-in-Use: Practical Dance Vocabularies and Knowing," 2020, 259–81 and "Annotation and Documentation: Expressing the Unsayable", ickamsterdam.com, accessed 16.9.2023, https://www.ickamsterdam.com/en/academy/peers-researchers/annotation-and-documentation-47 .

rationalizing intellection. I will bring attention to the need for articulating vocabularies from the inside perspective of dance experience to be able to enter in dialogue with other fields of knowledge and discourse. To historically contextualize my take on *dancing language* understood as a creative mediator that connects the metaphysical with the physical, I will conclude this chapter by drawing attention to the religious and spiritual impulses that gave birth to modern dance.[37]

Historical positioning. Circling around the unspeakable with dance and words

Due to the corporeal and non-verbal nature of dance, its relation to verbal discourse and theory is complex and ambiguous. I experience dance as a language and as a medium to communicate about what appears to remain unspeakable.[38] To perceive myself and the world through the act of dancing has become a means to interrogate and to investigate myself, what this self might be constituted by and how it relates to other selves and to the world.
I treat dance (and choreography) as a ***spatial-corporeal text**** that communicates a specific type of knowledge.[39]

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[37] The choice to focus here on the beginnings of modern dance during the 20th century is related to the aim of exploring how a spiritually oriented contemporary dance practice can be brought in dialogue with practices that embody esoteric forms on thought which emerged in Western Europe during the same timeframe as modern dance. Since the 1960s which mark the beginnings of postmodern dance, numerous spiritual, immaterial and metaphysical approaches to the art of dance have been explored including performatively embodied references to the sacred, trance, altered states, shamanism, healing, fabulation, the occult, oracular practices and mediumship. Given the lack of academically situated critical discourse on these practices and the limited scope of this chapter, I only reference here examples from the period of the beginnings of modern dance. I warmly thank Jeroen Fabius for alerting me to include and mention here the spiritually oriented but rarely discursively elaborated dance practices since the 1960.

[38] I am aware that the dilemma of communicating the non-verbal has also been addressed by for example T.W. Adorno and J. Derrida in the context of philosophical discourse. To my knowledge, they did not include the (dancing) body and a *dancing language* as departure points for questioning relations between the metaphysical and the physical and to develop lines of argumentation and a conceptual apparatus that seeks to address, contain and intertwine the physically sensible and the intuitively intelligible. How this research may be meaningful against the backdrop of the thoughts of Adorno and Derrida on the communicability of the non-verbal lies beyond my field of expertise and focus of interest. I am very curious about elaborations on this question by other scholars and/or artists based on in depth knowledge of their work. I am grateful to Prof. Dr. Anke Haarmann (Program Director of PhDArts, ACPA) for informing me about the relatability of my questioning to the work of these philosophers.

[39] The notion of *spatial-corporeal text* draws together an understanding of dance and choreography as bodily text and as knowledge of space. Allsopp and Lepecki, "Editorial on Choreography," 2008, 1-6. Lepecki here reflects on the ontology of dance by unpacking "choreography" as a "syncretic fusion" of movement and writing and hence understanding dance and choreography as a form of

This research is fueled by a necessity ignited by dance to learn to speak, write and read the *spatial-corporeal text* that my body communicates in dance. In my approach to dance, I navigate the edge between knowing and not-knowing, between choreographed and spontaneously emerging movements in the moment of the performative event. In speaking, writing and reading the *spatial-corporeal text* of my dancing body I focus specifically on what the dancing body may tell us about possible relations between the metaphysical and the physical.

Globally and historically, dance has existed in nearly all cultural contexts. Dance is often transmitted orally and physically without a written score or theoretical reflection. In many traditional and contemporary forms of dance, the intentions behind the movements of the human body are embodied non-verbally and implicitly within the dance.[40] Making these intentions verbally explicit can become the basis for theoretical and methodological reflections on dance yet very often remain implicit and unspoken.[41] However, in some contemporary dance practices, oral and written verbal reflections have become an integral part of making the implicit knowledge embodied in dance (partially) explicit.

The relationship between dance and theoretical discourse in Western Europe has undergone many mutations since the 18th century until today. During the early phases of modern Western dance, Mary Wigman (1886 – 1973), a pioneer of expressionist dance, stated that it is impossible to capture the message of dance in written or spoken words. She nevertheless wrote a book about *The Language of Dance* (1966)[42] where she explains that

> … even if the danced message, in the uniqueness of its form-turned-revelation, defies capture in the spoken or written word – because it has no need for words – even then one may convey something [in writing about it] of that pure

bodily text. Choreography has also been conceptualized as a "knowledge of space" ["das Wissen vom Raum"] generated and performed through movement. See Böhme and Huschka, *Wissenskultur Tanz: Historische Und Zeitgenössische Vermittlungsakte Zwischen Praktiken Und Diskursen*, 2009, 9-10.

[40] Brandstetter and Klein, *Dance [and] Theory* 2013, 11.

[41] See for example De Lahunta, *(Capturing Intention) Documentation, Analysis and Notation Research Based on the Work of Emio Greco |PC*, 2007.

[42] Wigman, *The Language of Dance*, 1966.

> and profound bliss with which man is blessed when, in moments of full awareness of his being, he opens and shapes the realms of his experience.[43]

Wigmans' description of the gifts of "full awareness of being" when creating experiences through artistic means can also be related to other artistic practices. What is specific to dance though, is the inscription and creation of realms of experience into the human body and through the human body into space. Wigman's contemporary and collaborator Rudolf Laban, also known as the philosopher of expressionist modern dance, was one of the first and most lastingly influential dance theoreticians in the history of modern Western dance.[44] His investments in a theoretical approach to dance resulted in a spatial theory, a *Choreutics*[45] and a symbol-based movement notation system, which is still used, taught and further developed today.[46]

Dance often reflects the experience of the *Zeitgeist* of an era: from the 1920s onwards, expressionist dance (*Ausdruckstanz*) commented aesthetically on the prevailing cultural climate, embodying a critique on the fragmentation and mechanization of society, and propagating a return to a holistic experience of nature. An example are the dance works developed by Rudolf Laban and Mary Wigman during the summer schools of the Asconan counterculture community "Monte Verità" (1913 - 1918). Together they prepared the ground for new forms of expressivity in modern dance by investigating the interdependence of spirit, nature and the human body through dance[47]. Their shared aim was to call a halt to the "progress of disintegrating into disunity"[48].

Dance Theatre in the 1970s increasingly commented on power relations as they were reflected in the behavioral patterns of the body in motion. An example are the works of the icon of German Tanztheater Pina Bausch, who exposed power relations inherent in the theatrical representation of gendered bodies.[49]

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[43] Wigman, *The Language of Dance* 1966, 9.
[44] Brandstetter and Klein, *Dance [and] Theory*, 11.
[45] Laban, *Choreutics*, 2011 [1966].
[46] See for example "Preserving the Past, Enriching the Present, Securing the Future," Dance Notation Bureau, accessed 30.4.23, http://dancenotation.org/.
[47] Bradley, *Rudolf Laban* 2009, 9.
[48] Laban, *Choreutics* 2011 [1966], 8.
[49] Cody, "Woman, Man, Dog, Tree: Two Decades of Intimate and Monumental Bodies in Pina Bausch's Tanztheater," 1998, 115–31.

Contemporary dance since the 1990s is often engaged with questions related to identity, gender, presence and representation, cultural differences and the relation between the dancing body and language. Examples are Felix Ruckert's performance *Hautnah* (performed between 1995-1999) where he deconstructs the performer-spectator relationship by disrupting the convention of their corporeally separated identity. *Hautnah* blurs the boundaries between the stage and the auditorium through intimate sensual encounters between participating individuals.[50] Or *Dispositif 3.1* (2001) by French choreographer Alain Buffard (1960-2013) where discrepancies and contradictions between a performative event and its surrounding discursive apparatus were highlighted.[51]

According to the editors of *Knowledge in Motion, Perspectives of Artistic and Scientific Research in Dance* (2007), dance in the early 21st century seems to have been given the task of positioning itself in relation to a "knowledge-based society."[52] This book was published as an extension of the 2006 Dance Congress held at the Haus der Kulturen der Welt in Berlin. Examples for dance practices that explicitly engage with the epistemological dimensions of dance are here gathered under the thematic umbrellas of "Artistic Research", "Body Knowledge and Body Memory", "Dance History and Reconstruction", "Reception and Participation", "Professional Education and Retraining in Dance" and "Dance Pedagogy and Cultural Work".[53]

Around 1990 and 2000, new types of dance emerged in Western Europe, characterized by an engaged combination of theory, discourse and dance. They were at that time often grouped under the vividly debated header of "conceptual dance." Prominent examples are Xavier Le Roy and Jérôme Bel. These conceptually oriented dance makers can also be subsumed under the header "non-dance", a movement in contemporary dance that originated around the 1990s in France.

"Non-dance" implies a transdisciplinary orientation where traditional movement vocabulary is discarded in favor of integrating vocabularies from other art forms.[54] Neither artists that

[50] Burt, "Resistant Identities: Anderson and Ruckert," 2007, 208-215.

[51] Marquié, "Dispositif Trouble. When What Is Said Is Not What Is Shown," 2007, 237.

[52] Klein, "Dance in a Knowledge Society," 2007, 27-28.

[53] Gehm, Husemann, and von Wilcke, *Knowledge in Motion. Perspectives of Artistic and Scientific Research in Dance*, 2007.

[54] See for example "Danse contemporaine – Pour une chorégraphie des regards. Un bouleversement des codes. 6 Danse ou Non-Danse: Par où la Danse?", Centre Pompidou, Internet Archive Wayback

were grouped under these terms nor theorists readily embraced these categorizations.[55] These new movements in dance art integrated the impact of experimental performance art on the contemporary art scene during the 1960s and 1970s and were informed by minimalist and conceptual movements in the visual arts. "Conceptual dance" was one of many possible names such as for example "physical theatre", "multimedia performance", "performance art", "body art", "live art" etc.[56]

Conceptually oriented forms of dance often reflect on how dance can be seen in terms of a "performativity of embodied thought." They can be characterized by an increased intellectual engagement with dance, philosophically, politically and experimentally. Central topics are for example the staging of presence, de- and reconstructing conventional ways of theatrical representation and thus critically reframing perception and attention. Experimenting with how the human body is presented on stage can make evident how the perception of the (dancing) human body is conditioned.[57]

Dance theoretician André Lepecki[58] proposes to avoid using the term 'conceptual dance' and to leave these developments nameless.[59] Not because he is critical of these developments (on the contrary, he embraced them wholeheartedly and wrote extensively about them)[60], but because he considered it essential to this heterogeneous movement to remain uncategorized. This choice might also be related to a complex polarization that the use of the term 'conceptual dance' ignited in the dance field. Many artists have rejected to be called 'conceptual' for varying reasons. For example, because the term would often wrongly imply that it abolishes dance as a corporeal practice and that conceptual dance would operate merely on the theoretical plane. Instead, the emphasis would lie on "the conceptualization of dance parameters" and the works are still seen as highly performative and physical.[61]

Machine, last modified 2004, accessed 3.6.2023, https://web.archive.org/web/20110126112022/http://www.centrepompidou.fr/education/ressources/ENS-spectacles-vivants/02-06.html

[55] Fabius, "The missing history of (not) conceptual dance," 2012, 3.

[56] Lepecki, "Concept and Presence. The Contemporary European Dance Scene," 2004, 171-172.

[57] Fabius, "The missing history of (not) conceptual dance," 6-11.

[58] André Lepecki is Associate Professor at the department of Performance Studies at the Tisch School of the Arts, New York.

[59] Lepecki (2004) quoted by Fabius, "The missing history of (not) conceptual dance," 3.

[60] Lepecki, *Exhausting Dance. Performance and the Politics of Movement*, 2006.

[61] Fabius, "The missing history of (not) conceptual dance," 2012, 2.

Lepecki describes this movement in dance art since the early 1990s in more general terms: it includes many choreographers with diverse and diverging training backgrounds, coming from different national and social contexts, with at times conflicting aesthetic orientations and political views. What they share is that they position dance in relation to the larger context of art and of society, dissolving the boundaries between disciplines and categories and including dialogue, thought and research as constitutive components of the labor of dance creation. Lepecki also analyzed these developments as a "radical recasting" of dance, as a departure from a theatrical paradigm (as exemplified by the *Tanztheater* of the 1980s) and as a "political move" towards a performance paradigm.[62]

Rather than labeling these new developments in dance, Lepecki shifts the focus to the ontology of dance by looking at the term 'choreography' (coined in the late seventeenth century by Raoul-Auger Feuillet) as a syncretic fusion of movement and writing. Bringing together the terms of movement and writing has in his view determined the creation and reception of dance performances during the last four hundred years. The relation between movement and writing continues to determine and frame performance practices and their theorizations, especially in relation to 'conceptual' and 'post-conceptual' performance art.[63]

Critics of explicitly intellectual approaches to dance creation argue that it should be enough to merely enjoy the human presence of the performers, that looking at dance is simply a way of experiencing love for movement and the joy of feeling alive.[64] Others argue that conceptual approaches to dance drift too much towards the realm of thought and the mental space, deviating from dance as an intrinsically bodily practice.[65] According to dance critic Pieter 't Jonck, conceptual dance became "a means to think about the relation between the imaginary, the spectator and the performer in a way that is highly critical towards the common construction of images of man and his body or even of society."[66]

I agree that the mere presence of a human body on stage can change our perception of the human being, when skillfully contextualized within a theatrical and discursive framework.

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[62] Lepecki, "Concept and Presence. The Contemporary European Dance Scene," 2004, 171-172.
[63] Allsopp and Lepecki, "Editorial on Choreography," 2008, 1.
[64] Birringer, "Dance and Not Dance," 2005, 15.
[65] Fabius, "The missing history of (not) conceptual dance," 2012, 2.
[66] T'Jonck, "Dans en paranoïa. Aantekeningen bij Klapstuk #11 (en #10)," 2005, 50. Quoted in Fabius, "The missing history of (not) conceptual dance," 2012, 6.

I am also convinced that such an altered perception can be significant for contemporary society in many ways. The human body on stage is saturated with potential meaning even without much bodily motion or articulated movement vocabulary.

Rather than focusing on critically de- and recomposing already known modes or images of representing the human being in a theatrical setting, I am more interested in how a human body can speak through danced movement about a sense of self or being that is yet unknown. To speak through dance about a sense of belonging to a corporeality that exceeds the limits of the boundaries of my skin. I perceive this altered sense of self to be able to evolve relatively independently from socially constructed images or from political representations of the human being. I believe that dance is a possible pathway for such a sense of self or being to reveal itself. I am interested in how a human being/me can gain a deeper understanding about being human in relation to other beings and to the world through dance. In dance, I perceive my self as situated in between the metaphysical and the physical. I perceive my ***dancing body**** as an interface that participates with two worlds and draws them together through the medium of dance. My hypothesis is that this other sense of self is yet unconscious to a large degree and that the language of a *dancing body* can bring to the surface some of this yet unknown dimension of human beingness. Dance can imprint it into the space, to be eventually interpreted from different angles and perspectives.

One aspect of the creative tension between movement and writing that Lepecki identifies as having framed the evolution of dance creation and reception is reflected in this research in the ***dance language**** (non-verbal and verbal communication from the first-person perspective) and the discursive contextualization thereof with a ***dancing language****.

With the non-verbal dimension of my *dance language* I circumnavigate, question and reach towards the unspeakable through the movements of my body. I interrogate my *dancing body* about its understanding of natural forces, laws, relations and principles and I verbalize some aspects of this understanding. I am not (yet) consciously aware of many of them, but I intuit that my body knows more than I do. Hence, I speculatively frame the language of my *dancing body* as participating in a dialogical relation with the metaphysical and the physical, drawing both dimensions of being together in its experience of dance. In combination with the verbally discursive framing of this *dance language* in dialogue with other fields of discourse, I aim to expand a vision about human corporeality, about its unknown depths and the *altered states*

of knowing it may encounter in the danced experience. If we imagine a dance of the future, how might dances be danced and perceived after having gone through a conceptually reflexive stage? What could be a next step of dance's artistic evolution? What lies beyond the conceptualized body in motion? How does the conceptualization of the body in motion relate to the actual experience of a dancing body? Is the beyond of conceptual theorization of the dancing body something like a corporeal intellect? What is the corporeal intelligence of the body in danced motion, how does it know and what kind of information does it communicate?

I see the increasing cognitive reflexivity and theorization of dance as a necessary step in its further evolution as an art form. It is needed to emancipate dance from being categorized as archaic, visceral and fundamentally irrational art form to allow it to dialogue with other knowledge cultures and to create an ontology and epistemology of dance that can give argumentative authority to other than rational types of knowing embodied in dance. I see the key concepts ***spiritual corporeality****, ***altered states of knowing**** and ***embodied gnosis**** as a foundation for such an ontology and epistemology. I posit that yes, dance is irrational, but not only, and that in its irrationality lies a potential for *altered states of knowing* and perceiving the human body and its relation to other bodies, to the planet and to the cosmos.

Ideas about the nature of dance seen from the perspective of artistic practice vary according to artistic paradigms and to how different choreographers construct them. To give just three examples of how choreographers have reflected on the medium of dance:

> The dance is an object in space and time. The object of the dance is to obliterate that (Merce Cunningham in "Space, Time and Dance," 1952).[67]

> When do we call it dance? It does in fact have something to do with consciousness, with bodily consciousness, and the way we form things. But then it needn't have this kind of aesthetic form and still be dance (Pina Bausch in conversation with Jochen Schmidt, 1978).[68]

[67] Lepecki, "Introduction/ /Dance as Practice of Contemporaneity," 2012, 4.
[68] Lepecki, "Positioning Dance/Theorizing Movement," 2012, 56.

> Its most singular event is dance's capacity to demonstrate that the body is an open system of exchange, ready for all kinds of metamorphosis, revealing a forever unfinished and unfinishable self, and occasioning the event of becoming (Xavier le Roy in "Self-interview" 2000).[69]

André Lepecki distills five key qualities of dance as an aesthetic practice: ephemerality, corporeality, precariousness, scoring and performativity:

Ephemerality refers to the fact that dance does not leave a material object behind after the performance. It thereby opens pathways to conceive the "economies of objecthood in the arts" differently.

Corporeality is understood as dance being able to create variations on modalities of embodiment. The dancer's labor is here defined as "to embody, disembody and re-embody."[70] Dance for Lepecki redefines corporeality by creatively negotiating bodily subjectivity. His view on dance's precariousness is related to the play of forces with which it is naturally engaged and its subaltern position in the economy of the arts. Dance is seen as precarious because it performs the frailty and impermanence of the human condition. On a social level, dance's precariousness is also related to performing and embodying the increasingly vulnerable conditions of life that are threatened by the globalization of neoliberal financial capitalism.

Lepecki also highlights the political aspects of writing scores for dance or choreography. A dance score is a set of tasks or demands that are to be interpreted or fulfilled by the dancer. By performing a score or a choreography, dancers need to submit to the artistic directives of a choreographer. Lepecki critically questions the disciplinarian aspects and "imperative forces" that are implicit in how scores and choreographies are created. The political dimensions of scoring are addressed in terms of "disciplined bodies operating in a regime of obedience for the sake of bringing an art piece into the world." By reflecting on the relations between bodies in motion translated from the abstract space of the black box theatre or rehearsal space to the space of interaction of social forces in the art field and in society,

[69] André Lepecki, "Introduction/ /Dance as Practice of Contemporaneity," 2012, 22.
[70] Ibid, 15.

choreography is imbued with political dimensions and able to propose new forms of social relations.

Lepecki refers to performativity as an "always singular yet always dispersed (or semi-absent) source," insisting on being actualized by and through dance and thereby providing its continuity of presence. For Lepecki, it is the performative aspect of dance that can act as an affective-political force in the field of contemporary art.[71]

Very generally speaking, two major streams can be identified in contemporary Western theatre dance. On the one hand there is the neo-classical stream where classical ballet vocabulary remains the major point of reference for technical and expressive virtuosity. Discursive reflexivity on dance from within the practice so far has remained minimal here, although there are recent initiatives that invite a re-thinking of the position of classical and neo-classical ballet repertoire in relation to contemporary society.[72]

On the other hand, there are developments in contemporary choreography that intensively engage with intellectual and philosophical reflection.[73] Besides the themes mentioned above with reference to conceptually oriented dance, these practices often critically question the consequences of inscribing dance techniques into dancing bodies[74] and the "regimes of obedience"[75] that are associated with them. This critique is partially based on the rejection of the implicit power relations, disciplinarian authority, and a reduced space for freedom of interpretation that characterize classical and modern dance techniques.[76]

Since postmodern dance, dance has emancipated itself from representation and the narrative. Movement can be seen as an artistic medium that is self-sufficient and able to

[71] Ibid, 15-16.

[72] See for example Operaballet.nl, "Het Nationale Ballet: Succesful third edition of the work conference Positioning Ballet 7.3.2023,"accessed 3.6.2023, https://www.operaballet.nl/en/news/successful-third-edition-work-conference-positioning-ballet .

[73] This distinction is derived from Emio Greco and Pieter C. Scholten's positioning of the intuitive body in between the conceptual and the virtuoso body in the dance landscape during the 1990s. See also "The Intuitive Body," ICK Dans Amsterdam, accessed 3.6.2023, https://www.ickamsterdam.com/nl/academy/peers-onderzoekers/intuitive-body-11 .

[74] Bauer, "When Train(ing) Derails," 2009, 74-79.

[75] Lepecki, "Introduction/ /Dance as Practice of Contemporaneity," 15.

[76] Lepecki, "Choreopolice and Choreopolitics: or the task of the dancer," 2013, 13-27.

create its own time and space.[77] Dancers are not expected to pretend whatever it is that they are enacting in the dance. They are "real" persons who actively participate in choice making while being fully "absorbed in process".[78]

In my view, these developments have led to a rather scarce and hesitant engagement with the potential *meaning* of dance. Whereas for example the "identity of the work of art and its authorship" have been questioned and redefined in other art forms throughout the twentieth century, contemporary dance works still lack solid conceptual frames that could be challenged.[79] It has almost become a cliché that general audiences tend not to be able to understand dance, that they respond to it largely only on a visceral and affective level. Likewise, a common response from dance practitioners would be that there is nothing to understand, that movement can stand for itself and for nothing else.

Questions of meaning are addressed in those choreographic practices that invest in the development of conceptual and philosophical frameworks where dance engages with the relational on, for example, micro-political levels of sensation and affect.[80]

Another example of not evading the problem of meaning in contemporary choreographic practice are Emio Greco and Pieter C. Scholten for whom "creativity is incarnate in the body."[81] They are interested in the impulses that create movement and in establishing contact with the motivations behind them.[82] They speak of their choreographic practice in terms of a "language of the flesh":

> There is a certain narrative we call the language of the flesh that needs to be understood. That kind of material cannot be used to tell another story because it already contains a strong element that does not need to be articulated. Once we

[77] Emio Greco and Pieter C. Scholten in Magnini, *Inspriation. Emio Greco | Pieter C. Scholten. The Multiplicity of Dance,* 2015, 7.
[78] Gardner, "Notes on Choreography," 2008, 57.
[79] Louppe (1997) quoted by Gardner in ibid, 55.
[80] See for example SenseLab-3e, accessed 3.6.23, https://senselab.ca/wp2/ and Erin Manning, *The Minor Gesture*, 2016.
[81] Emio Greco and Pieter C. Scholten in Magnini, *Inspriation*, 7.
[82] Ibid*,* 28.

> understand this language, we can articulate the choreography without trying to [cover it up] with a narrative. [83]

A theme that has been introduced recently in conceptually oriented contemporary choreographic practice is the notion of "Expanded Choreography."[84] This term relates to exchanges between art disciplines, where choreographic thinking may be applied for example to curating strategies or as a visual arts methodology. The conceptualization of choreographic approaches allows choreographic ideas to live independently from dancing bodies and to migrate across disciplines. In principle this is indeed a renewal of what choreography and choreographic discourse is and can be. It contributes to an expansion of dance and choreography in the contemporary art circuit. Yet an increased emphasis on transferring choreographic and dance labor to the creation of concepts and to reflective work can also lead towards a decreasing availability and ability of dance artists to confront and to transform the physical resistance of the body in dance creation.

Dance: between the corporeal and the metaphysical

In the following, I will position my approach to dance in the context of the historical and contemporary dance landscape as roughly sketched above.

Most research in dance and choreography is performed in relation to the choreographic. In this research, choreography is not excluded, but the emphasis lies on dance in relation to the dancing body – i.e., to reconsider contemporary choreography from the bottom up: from the *dancing body* and with an explicit focus on dance's corporeality and its many ways of speaking and knowing.[85]

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[83] Ibid, 16.

[84] See for example "Expanded Choreography MACBA Museu d'Art Contemporani de Barcelona-March 2012," e-flux.com, accessed 30.4.23, https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/34425/expanded-choreography/ .

[85] This positioning is aligned with the choreographic vision of Emio Greco and Pieter C. Scholten about "the intuitive body" (situated between the conceptual and the virtuosic body) as the protagonist of dance creation and as a vehicle to rediscover its own meaning. In this work I explore this vision and extend it through my *dancing body* into areas of knowledge, practice and discourse that my intuitive body is guiding me towards. See for example "The Intuitive Body", ickamsterdam.com, accessed 16.9.23, https://www.ickamsterdam.com/en/academy/peers-researchers/intuitive-body-11 .

According to one of the most influential contemporary choreographers William Forsythe, dance and choreography are distinct practices. In his view, when they coincide, choreography "serves as a channel for the desire to dance."[86] With his idea of the choreographic as an "ecology of idea-logics" that "do not insist on a single path to form-of-thought and persist in the hope of being without enduring", he inquires into the possibility of "choreographic objects", expressions of choreographic thought that are autonomous and that can exist independently from the body.[87] With this proposition, Forsythe counters the assumption that the substance of choreographic thought resides exclusively in the body.
In my view, the concept of "choreographic objects" exemplifies how the conceptualization of the choreographic allows it to become disembodied.[88]

For Forsythe:

> Choreography is a curious and deceptive term. The word itself, like the processes it describes, is elusive, agile, and maddeningly unmanageable.
> To reduce choreography to a single definition is not to understand the most crucial of its mechanisms: to resist and reform previous conceptions of its definition.[89]

Although I agree that defining choreography goes against its nature, I briefly trace here a general outline of the choreographic for the sake of clarity about what this research is *not* focusing on. In simple terms, I would describe choreography as a deliberate scoring and manipulation of movement materials, ideas, principles, energies and forces in time and space.

This dissertation project brings together a *dance language* and its theoretical/discursive contextualization through a *dancing language* in body and words as if it were a choreography. This also includes for example the dialogue with supervisors and the context and "score" of a

[86] Forsythe, "William Forsythe Choreographic Objects," williamforsythe.com, accessed 30.4.2023, https://www.williamforsythe.com/essay.html. See also Neri and Respini, *William Forsythe. Choreographic Objects*, 2018.
[87] Ibid.
[88] "William Forsythe Choreographic Objects, Solo –Exhibitions," williamforsythe.com, accessed 30.4.2023. Date unknown. https://www.williamforsythe.com/exhibitions.html .
[89] "William Forsythe Choreographic Objects," accessed 30.4.2023, https://www.williamforsythe.com/essay.html

promotional trajectory. Yet my investigation rather builds up its lines of thought and corporeal motion from the perspective of the experience of a contemporary dancing body by the dancer (me).[90] To reiterate what I stated in the introduction: I seek a better understanding of the ways a dancing body can know about and communicate possible relations between the metaphysical and the physical. The *dancing language* of this written text embodies this quest by interweaving corporeal with written discourse to deliver potentialities of knowing, and eventually also potentialities of meaning. My focus thus lies specifically on the corporeality of a dancing body and its ways of knowing, being and communicating.

This research unfolds around ontological questions about the nature of corporeality, the possibility of a corporeal epistemology and the language of a *dancing body*, more so than on questions related to the art and craft of choreographic composition. I depart from my own body which becomes here also a research laboratory and a vehicle for communication.

I experience my dancing body as a ***psychophysical resonating space**** where the subtle materiality of the psyche (or the soul, mind, consciousness, spirit – the choice of terminology depends on whether the inner being of the human being is seen from secular scientific, psychological or religious and esoteric point of view) is in intimate and dynamic touch with the dense materiality of the physical body and its surrounding space. As an artistic criterion, I posit that the quality of connection between the psyche (or soul), the body and its surrounding space is reflected in the movement qualities of the dance, while I am not yet fully conscious of the significance of this connection. This self-diagnosis is one of the main motivations driving this investigation. I identify the psyche (or soul, or inner being) as the realm of inner experience that lives in and is in dialogue with the body and the forces that traverse it from inside and outside. With *psychophysical resonating space* I refer on a micro psychobiological scale to the individualized entity of a dancing human being. With the term mind (or consciousness or spirit) I refer to what may reach beyond the individualized psychophysical entity of the human being towards the transcendental and metaphysical

[90] The experience of a (my) contemporary dancing body is situated as a particular and subjective experience of articulating movements of dance through a lived dialogue with the mobility and resistance of the materiality of a specific (my) human body. With the notion of ***embodied gnosis**** I am exploring a spiritual-corporeal mode of experience that enlarges subjective perception towards being an integral part of a supra-sensorially intuited and infinitely larger body beyond the individual human body. For an overview of different "modes of experience" from the perspective of social and cultural theory including classical, objective, subjective, technological and aesthetic experience see Lash, *Experience*, 2018, 1-13.

realm on a macro cosmological scale. I experience the *dancing body* as igniting a process of transformation whereby conscious and unconscious relations of the human being with his or her body, soul, spirit, the earth and the cosmos are engaged in a poetic dialogue of mutual illumination. I position the dancing body as grounded in the concrete corporeality of the body in motion, yet always also moving in relation to the metaphysical by its intrinsic relation to space, time, mind and being.

Dance, as I see it, lives through a body in the duration of a present moment and brings it in relation with tangibly physical (dense) as well as intangibly metaphysical (subtle) aspects of being. Dance does not only live in the body of the dancer(s). The spectators of the dance also participate in it. When the dancer experiences a dancing body, the spectator also experiences a dancing body. The spectator can get a glimpse of the inside of the *dancing body* if the dancer tries to communicate it, through dance or through other means, such as spoken or written text for example. The inner being of the spectator can be touched and moved by the movements that come from the inner being of the dancer, and vice versa.

This research focuses primarily on the inner perspective of the dancer as the main territory for investigation. Everything that is written here as well as in the *spatial-corporeal text* of the dance in the performance SEI comes from my inner being but is brought outwards to reach others as well. By better understanding this inner perspective myself and by finding ways to communicate it through the body and through words, the spectator/reader of this text can participate in what moves my inner being. In this way the spectators' experience of the *dancing body* can be more informed and more layered, so that we can make sense out of it together. Possible meanings of the communication of this text and of the text of the *dancing body* will emerge between the dancer, the dance, the written text, the musical composition, the spectators of the dance and the readers of this text. To elaborate more extensively on these relations would require another dissertation and will not be included here.[91]

The experience of a multiplicity of dimensions of being as perceived through the inner experience of dance happens through a complex intertwinement between the materiality of the body, the psyche and other invisible forces. These forces traverse the body from the inside as well as from the outside. Forces that participate in the dance and that belong to different

[91] Some thoughts about these relations will also be discussed in chapter six: dance, music and dance language in SEI.

categories of being are for example gravity, which is directly perceivable with the physical body, and will and affect, which are invisible forces that cause movement from within the psyche (or soul). In the at times numinous[92] encounter between the psyche, the materiality of the dancing body and the spaces in which it moves, the question rises: what is happening there?

The metaphysical does not necessarily need to be consciously dealt with in dance. Some kind of intuitive convergence between mental, affective, sensorial and corporeal movements leads to the creation of dance. A sometimes also necessarily unconscious intertwinement of forces informs to a large extent intuitive choice making in improvisation as well as in the writing of choreographic scores.

Whether the intertwinement between mental, affective, sensorial and corporeal movement in dance is taken to be a strictly psycho-physiological phenomenon without any metaphysical, or spiritual cause or relation is of course relative to the worldview within which a dance is embedded. This is also relative to what a dance intends to enact.

With this research I am relating yet unconscious factors that inform choice making in dance creation to a hypothetical intrinsic relation between the physical corporeality of a dancing human being and the metaphysical realm. By unfolding different perspectives on the ontological, epistemological and discursive potentials of the corporeality of a contemporary dancing body, I contribute to the burgeoning discourse on dance and spirituality from the perspective of a contemporary artistic practice with an explicit emphasis on questioning its intuited metaphysical and spiritual dimensions. My approach to the subject matter through *languaging* dance differs from somatic approaches to dance where the first-person subjective perception of corporeal sensations is foregrounded. Although there are evident overlaps with somatic practices by giving attention to the language and states of knowing of the *dancing body,* my explorations emphasize the suprasensory, trans-personal and epistemological dimensions of danced experience. Another addition to the already existing academically situated discourse on dance and spirituality (as far as I can overview its main contours) is, that

[92] The term “numinous” refers to an experience of something mysterious, supernatural, and holy. A numinous experience may also be related to an aesthetic sense or force of appeal. “Numinous,” *Merriam- Webster online Dictionary*, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/numinous, accessed 20.1.19. See also Otto, *The Idea of the Holy*, Oxford University Press, 1936.

my take on it is developed through an artistic research perspective without therapeutical ambitions or connotations which are often referred to in this context. That the practice I am developing might have therapeutical consequences is not excluded but it is not its primary aim.[93]

To recapitulate briefly: I described spirituality as a human practice that seeks to establish and maintain contact between the everyday world and an intuitable, but neither verifiable nor falsifiable, meta-empirical source of meaning.[94] I stated in the introduction that I use the term *spiritual corporeality* in dance in a sense whereby attuning intentional orientations to a specific quality and texture of corporeal consciousness is experienced as a practice of maintaining contact between the everyday world and a psychophysically intuited metaphysical source of being, life and meaning.[95]

Dance covers an extensive scale of being in time from mind (or spirit) to matter and from matter to mind. By inquiring into the relation between the metaphysical and the physical as I experience it from the perspective of my dancing body, my approach to dance is on the one hand a fundamental, curiosity driven research into a vertical self-understanding of a/my dancing body (body-planet-cosmos). On the other hand, how my dancing body communicates its inner experience of relations between the metaphysical and the corporeal and how this communication is received and interpreted is aligned on a horizontal vector (you and I). One vector does not exclude the other, but both enrich and need each other. How the dynamic

[93] Leading scholar in forwarding peer-reviewed academic scholarship on dance, spirituality and somatic practices is Dr. Amanda Williamson. Williamson is Honorary Professor at the Centre for Dance Research at Coventry University, director of the Center for Embodiment & Bio-somatic Dance Movement Naturotherapy and founding editor of the peer-reviewed academic journal *Journal Dance, Movement and Spiritualities (published since 2014).* See *Dance, Movement & Spiritualities (Journal),* intellectbooks.com, accessed 30.4.2023, https://www.intellectbooks.com/dance-movement-spiritualities.
In contrast to therapeutic approaches often elaborated in this context, my take on the subject matter is developed specifically through the lens of an artistic research perspective without therapeutical ambitions or connotations.

[94] This understanding of spirituality is partially based on a definition by Wouter J. Hanegraaff: "I would define as a specific spirituality: 'any human practice which maintains contact between the everyday world and a more general meta-empirical framework of meaning by way of the individual manipulation of symbolic systems'." In Hanegraaff, "The Dreams of Theology and the Realities of Christianity," 2003, 719.

[95] See Chapter five: Attuning.

movements between both vectors unfolds through verbal and corporeal discourse eventually determines the aesthetic outcome of the *dancing language* in body and words.

Diving deep and reaching high: underneath and beyond the rational

That the kinds of knowing that dance can generate for dancers and the observing participants differ from rational and intellectual knowledge is variably shared among dance practitioners. Dance knowledge has also been classified as "the Other of mainstream intellectual academic culture" or as a "negation of modern knowledge[96]". While concerns about the epistemological dimensions of dance are still quite scarce in the professional landscape of contemporary dance, dance as a culture of knowledge with specific characteristics is already firmly established in academic scholarship on dance. To bridge the gap between academic scholarship on dance and the professional landscape of contemporary dance is also one of the targets of this research. Specifics of the knowledge of dance have been identified as for example "articulated in movement and performed in the body" and as implicit knowledge to be discovered in a corporeally stored archive. The knowledge of dance is generally seen as "materialized in the body" and contextualized in various aesthetic and social practices. These practices are often combined with language and image-based explications (through for example dance notation) which can generate precise and historicizing body and movement-based epistemologies.[97]

With my *dancing language* I intend to facilitate a specific understanding of dance as able to generate *altered states of knowing* and thus also as able to generate different kinds of epistemologies that navigate a tension field between what is implicitly unspeakable and its (partial) explication in words.

Based on many exchanges with dance colleagues I believe that the concept of *altered states of knowing* might resonate with other dance practices as well.

For the evolution of the kinds of knowing that are embodied in dance and to emancipate them to be able to dialogue with contemporary knowledge discourses, processes of rationalization are needed. In my view, the knowledge categories that have been proposed so far in relation

[96] Klein, "Dance in a Knowledge Society," 2007, 29.

[97] Quoted, transcribed and translated from German from Böhme and Huschka, *Wissenskultur Tanz,* 2009, 9-10.

to dance and the choreographic (such as for example tacit knowledge, know-how, authentic knowledge, procedural knowledge, declarative knowledge etc.[98]) do not yet sufficiently cover nuances and specificities of the artistic experience of dance and the subliminal[99] sense of (not) knowing it can convey to the dancers. The lack of explicit articulation of knowledge from the inside of the danced experience has also to do with a lack of vocabularies and language development from within dance practices. There are, though, growing efforts to give attention to vocabularies that are specific to contemporary practices of dance and choreography[100]. These vocabularies articulated from the inside perspective of embodied artistic experience can eventually support the development of heterogeneous dance and choreographic epistemologies. But there remains a lot of work to be done in that direction. The accompanying *Glossary* to this dissertation can be seen as one example for a body of terminologies born from the inside perspective of a dance experience yet transformed through a dialogue between dance experience and academic scholarship.

In response to a shared concern among dance professionals that many aspects of dance and performance remain not yet understood, dance scholar Scott deLahunta[101] brings questions and working paradigms from various choreographers and their creative processes in conjunction with other knowledge domains. Exchanges with other knowledge domains are often oriented towards finding new perspectives on understanding the yet unnamed or uncategorized aspects of dance and rely according to deLahunta to a large extent on the use of language to "describe, explain, clarify and probe the experience of dance creation."[102] The

[98] See for example McKechnie and Stevens, "Knowledge unspoken: Contemporary dance and the cycle of practice-led research, basic and applied research, and research-led practice," *Practice-led Research, Research-led Practice in the Creative Arts*, 2009, 84-103 and Nelson, "Practice-as-research and the Problem of Knowledge," 2006, 105-116.

[99] "Subliminal", *Merriam-Webster online Dictionary*, accessed 3.6.2022, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/subliminal . "1. Inadequate to produce a sensation or a perception", 2. Existing or functioning below the threshold of consciousness."

[100] See for example De Lahunta, "Language-in-Use: Practical Dance Vocabularies and Knowing," 2020, 259 -281, and ICK Amsterdam Academy, "Annotation and Documentation." Accessed 3.6.23. https://www.ickamsterdam.com/en/academy/peers-researchers/annotation-and-documentation-47 .

[101] Scott deLahunta is Professor of Dance at the Centre for Dance Research Coventry University and Co-director of Motion Bank (http://motionbank.org/).

[102] De Lahunta, "Language-in-Use: Practical Dance Vocabularies and Knowing," 2020, 259.

lines of inquiry that deLahunta has contributed to so far can be loosely clustered around the fields of cognitive science, digital technologies and anthropology.

DeLahunta explains that academic dance studies are faced with the insisting friction between conceptualizing dance as a form of writing and conceptualizing dance as "beyond the grasp of all language, especially written language."[103] My search for a *dancing language* that interweaves corporeal with verbal discourse to communicate and to investigate new perspectives on the relationship between the physical and the metaphysical is also situated in that tension field.

Dance knowledge has been scrutinized in academic contexts also from the perspectives of for example phenomenology[104], the social sciences,[105] aesthetics[106] and philosophy.[107] Key themes are often related to politics, gender, identity and performativity.[108]

The orientation of this investigation though is towards the spiritual, metaphysical, mystical or esoteric dimensions of danced experience, which is so far still a rather unexplored territory in academic dance studies. That there is a relation at all can be intuitively glimpsed - subjectively speaking - at rare moments, during experiences that hinge towards the numinous and that may occur during intensified or altered states of consciousness in dance. Yet it remains extremely challenging to find appropriate ways to bring these experiences into the realm of discursive rationality without flattening or banalizing them. To be able to gain a more solid contextual and epistemological foundation for these intuitive glimpses, I propose here to enter in dialogue with other disciplines where the relation between the metaphysical, the spiritual and the corporeal has been questioned thoroughly such as in the context of religious studies and more specifically in the academic study of (Western) esotericism[109] (see chapter

[103] Ibid, 261.

[104] See for example Sheets-Johnstone, *The Phenomenology of Dance*, 1979; Legrand, Grünbaum and Krueger, "Dimensions of Bodily Subjectivity," 2009, 279–83; Ness, "Foucault's Turn From Phenomenology: Implications for Dance Studies," 2011, 19-32.

[105] See for example Klein, "Dance in a Knowledge Society," 2007, 25 -36.

[106] See for example Denana, *Zur Ästhetik des Tanzes*, 2014.

[107] See for example Bunker, Pakes and Rowell, *Thinking through Dance*, 2013.

[108] See for example Franco and Nordera, *Dance Discourses. Keywords in dance research*, 2007, v-vii.

[109] Whether the "Western" in Western esotericism should be dropped or not is a topic of ongoing debate among contemporary scholars in esotericism but is for the time being not relevant to this

two). Although many contemporary dance practitioners develop their own rituals and ideas about spirituality in and through dance, these ideas mostly remain implicit within their art practice. They therefore also remain largely unexamined from academic points of view. This also may be due to a lack of an adequate language that allows dancers to verbally express the relations between dance, metaphysics and spirituality in a way that lives up to their actual experiences. It may also be related to a resistance towards reducing or pinning down continuously morphing experiential phenomena by squeezing them into pre-defined theoretical or conceptual categories through processes of verbalization. Implicitly embodied ideas about spirituality in dance can be very intimate and therefore vulnerable to misinterpretation or banalization.

Spiritually ignited: the beginnings of modern dance

A spiritualized idea about the space of danced embodiment is not new in dance history. Religion and dance have been affiliated with each other since the beginnings of the history of human beings. Dancer, philosopher, scholar of religion and farmer Kimerer La Mothe, goes so far as to state that there is a need to overcome "a conceptual dichotomy between 'religion' and 'dance'" by generating "conceptual resources able to acknowledge the agential presence of dance in religions ringing the world."[110] She proposes to see the movements of religion throughout time and space as a kind of dance, emphasizing the vitalizing qualities of dance and the need to see the rhythmic exchanges between dance and religion throughout time as constitutive of each other.[111]

research. For an impression about some of the main theoretical and methodological concerns see for example Pasi, "Oriental Kabbalah and the Parting of East and West in the Early Theosophical Society," 2010, 151-166; Hanegraaff, "The Globalization of Esotericism," 2015, 55-91; Asprem, "Beyond the West: Towards a New Comparativism in the Study of Esotericism," 2014, 3-33; Irvin, "Western Esotericism, Eastern Spirituality, and the Global Future," 2001, 1-47.

[110] LaMothe, "A History of Theory and Method in the Study of Religion and Dance, Past, Present, Future," 2018, 2.

[111] Ibid, 106. To exemplify her point of view: "… embraced by numerous Indigenous cultures, attested by early scholars of religion and dance, and now supported by recent discoveries in evolutionary biology, neuroscience and developmental psychology: human beings are animals who dance. Dancing is an initial form – the generative ground - of human culture, including and especially of religion." Ibid, 5.

Also the birth of modern dance in the early 20th century appears to have been ignited by spiritual impulses that are evident in the writings of modern dance pioneers such as Ruth St. Denis, Isadora Duncan and Martha Graham. Each of them wrote about the transformative experiences that dance engendered in them and included vocabularies, themes, storylines and symbols from religious discourse into their writings about the art of dance.[112] Rudolf Laban for example developed a spiritualized conception of space in his approach to dance, which was partially informed by integrating esoteric forms of thought into his dance philosophy and practice. A conscious relation with the spiritual origins of modern dance has often faded in the memories of contemporary dancers and choreographers who practice modern dance techniques or reference modern movement vocabularies in choreographic works. Modern dance techniques as they are being taught today in vocational art education, often do not explicitly include their spiritual dimensions or origins due to the secularized environment where these dance forms are being taught. Yet, many contemporary dancers or choreographers are inclined towards spirituality, so far mostly in corporeally implicit rather than in verbally explicit ways.

[112] LaMothe, "Transformation: An ecokinetic approach to the study of ritual dance," 2014, 60.