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Emergency:
Emergent Writings
on Live Art and
Performance

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VILI VON NISSINEN & DIANA SORIA HERNÁNDEZ
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Choreomundus / Craig

Choreomundus: Nice to meet you through this virtual dialogue! We are: Signa from Italy, Shanny from Malaysia, Bryan from the Philippines, Kinga from Hungary, Diana from Colombia and Olia from Belarus. We are a group of friends who met through being part of the same study program in Dance Knowledge, Practice and Heritage [Choreomundus]. We come from different backgrounds in terms of our studies and dance experience, such as cultural studies, philosophy, anthropology, theatre and film studies, contemporary dance, Noh theatre, ballet, and traditional dances from our countries. Being confronted with this huge variety we have started to question our own identities and heritage, the stereotypes that we give and are given as belonging to a culture X or being the person Y. We are not just these identity boxes but also people with our own stories that made us who we are. We carry all these loads on our bodies, and dance can be one way to unfold them.

Emergence: what can it emerge through sharing our different practices, through meeting the others in their cultural and personal diversity? For us creating bridges between people and culture is an emergency.

In our project in order to go beyond the stereotypes (masks?) we feel the need to open to the others, to be engaged. We must accept our vulnerability and discover its potential. We hope to do it by intertwining our dance practices (whose forms are much more fluid than what is usually imagined) and by telling our stories through our bodies and movements.

What is emergence/emergency for you?

Craig: For me, "emergence" is the ongoing process of developing and refining one's ideas and aesthetics, the continual growth that we undergo as we experience, process, and create. I like the feeling that we are always emerging, that we are always in transition. Robert Wilson said that he "doesn't say what something is, but instead asks what is it." Performance is this continual process of asking questions, of pulling the rug out from under our feet and enjoying that sensation of being suspended in mid-air.

And for me the "emergency" is the growing split between the "haves" and the "have-nots," the ability to compartmentalize one's own existence without any regard to the manner in which our action or inaction impacts others. Gwen Brown's seminal 1968 documentary about the Living Theatre begins with the withering critique of man's attempt to avoid contact with other people, to remain a comfortable distance and not become involved, "We only look each other in the eye when there's an emergency." This critique is just as relevant today as it was in the 1960s during the midst of the Vietnam War and the civil rights' movement in America. It is the same impulse that causes us to avert our eyes when we see someone crying in a subway or hear an argument in our next-door neighbor's apartment or walk past someone begging on the street... It is the fear of direct encounter, of dropping one's mask, of being vulnerable.

Choreomundus: Can you elaborate more on the "performative role-playing impulse of traditional text-based productions" and how is this related to

“acting” versus the “be” in the immediacy of the present tense? It seems to us that there is an attempt of expanding the notion of “acting” (on stage, in a traditional sense of what theatre is), towards the “everyday life,” of course in relation to a critique of the “fear of direct encounter.”

Craig: I am interested in Grotowski’s idea of performers facing the flame, of them removing their social masks and engaging in a complete total act. A lot of acting lets the performers hide behind a character; they give the audience their technique instead of their soul. It is this role-playing that creates the gap between the action and the doer. When Chris Burden is crucified on his car in his work *Transfixed*, there is no separation between self and action, there is no make-believe. The spectator sees real things happening to a real person. Of course this is an extreme version of a “total act” but it is the underlying spirit of the work I am exploring. When you create a compelling image and build an evocative series of actions, the performer doesn’t need to act; they just have to honestly perform the series of movements without adding theatrical affect and that is enough.

Choreomundus: What is the relation between social and political awareness and corporeal experience? Do you think that physical practices can be a tool to raise this awareness?

Craig: I think too much education is based on intellectual understanding rather than embodied experience. It is easy to get lost in words and language, to fall into the gap between the conceptual and the concrete. When I was studying with the Taiwanese performance company U Theatre, they emphasized the importance of somatic knowledge and of immersing themselves in the traditional performance practices that had been suppressed under the Nationalist KMT rule. As Philip Zarilli mentions in his research on Asian drama, in this type of performance “the doer and the done are one.”

I am very interested in the cross-cultural collaborative spirit in your work. You mention that you are interested in “intertwining” your dance practices. Would you please talk more about how you negotiate this collaborative integration of ideas and practices, of how these different traditions speak to or against each other?

Choreomundus: My (Bryan’s) interest in inter/cross-cultural project started when I participated in an intensive Japanese Noh Theatre training in the Philippines in 2011 under the Noh master for shite (principal actor) Naohiko Umewaka. I was in awe at first in the practical aspects of Noh, I mean an embodied or “experiential learning” as Jina Umali sensei (a Filipino scholar specialising in Japanese theatre) would call it. One motivation perhaps is to understand an aspect of Japanese culture via an engagement of the body; knowing the “other” at the same time going back to your personal history. This was my springboard when I agreed to collaborate with my fellow Choreomundus.

What inspires me/(us) is the unpredictability of knowing the “other.” Even the boundaries of negotiation is an inspiration, perhaps something similar on what you mention about the “sensation of being suspended in the mid-air”. The “against” provokes me (us) more to go back to my (our) own culture. For instance, how does the stereotypical movement quality of Belarus of being “cold” and “strict” relate to the stereotypical “happy” and “open” culture of the Philippines, or Malaysia?

Then, the personal search starts, we unravel this question through the collaborative integration of ideas.

I (we) still believe on the premise that the self always needs the “other” in their continuous growth and development.

Craig: How do you draw on different performance and cultural traditions without exoticizing them or just performing their exterior structures? For many traditions, practitioners spend a lifetime mastering the form. How do you draw on these diverse traditions without essentializing or exoticizing them?

Choreomundus: I guess the Choreomundus programme itself may help us to answer this question. The philosophy of anthropology and ethnochoreology: the emic conceptualisation or the knowledge from/within the culture is the very core of our investigation. This would remind us throughout the process: the delicate aspects of recontextualising/decontextualising movement practices and traditions. The strength of the group relies on an affirmation that what we are dealing with are not only movement structures, but movement knowledge as well. Taking these into account, the intuition and the “creative” would then take over while challenging each other’s movement knowledge and reproducing “new” structures, if not exploiting them.

Craig: After working as an ensemble, what new ideas have emerged through your collaboration? What new trends have you observed as emerging in theatre and the arts?

Choreomundus: As we are still in the process of creating (one-month to go!), the collaboration has

been reproducing various games and movement experiments. We actually do not think our project as a theatre piece, rather an open or inclusive performance form.

As I (Bryan) am coming from the traditional theatre practice where the basis of performance is script/a devised piece/or literary text, this venture has given me a fresh insight on the potentialities of movement practice itself. What I implicate here is the centrality of the body in the creation of something. I will definitely bring this as a token from this collaboration.

Craig: How effective do you think theatre is as a vehicle for dealing with “emergencies”? How does art inspire action?

Choreomundus: Perhaps I (we) can zoom in to one issue of the piece: personal identity vs. cultural identity. At first, we asked ourselves our own positions and locations. How can we unfold embodied movement that we learn/continuously learn/or perhaps what we want to forget? So, the “emergency” of knowing the “self” and the “other” comes in.

We still struggle how to define the “I”, the “you”, and the “us”; or we can even ask, is there the “us”? So, we wish that these issues can transcend across, not only in the piece (product), but most vital in the very process of collaboration.

Choreomundus / Fanny

Choreomundus: The common point that our project shares with yours is the (his)story an individual can bring to a mass movement. Our first impression was not of a mass formation; rather, a competition, a rapid (into slow) circular movement, a sense of survival of the fittest; perhaps still connected with globalized structures.

What might be the “common” story that an individual can bring; something that can connect to other individuals to form a mass? Do you have any particular personal insights on this?

Perhaps you intended the video to be recurring, an endless or open-ended scenario, making the public (audience) think of the issues on boundaries of mass movement.

Fanny: About my installation I can say that it is indeed intended to be a continuous loop — meaning with no clear beginning and end. The mass movement has always been there, more or less powerful, more or less visible, more or less demanding... However we live in a globalized mass moving world where it seems often difficult to go against the flow of the mass and the people around you... Again the question: do we follow fixed patterns or do we try to break out of them to create something new? And can we even create something new?

No matter how we answer these questions now, people will always be there and will always move as this is the essence of life for me :) That's why there is no clear beginning or end, when presented as an installation.

My installation deals with 150 people that are moving in circles — probably one of the most obvious and old rituals is a group of people moving or standing

in circles. Even though we picked this up, which at times also makes you dizzy, it can give a close view on each individual's process and fight to stay and move within the mass — that can be anything, a literal mass, a culture, a codex, a religion, a movement, etc. However this is one of the most fixed patterns I still believe that we can emphasize movement within a fixed pattern. However I remember that when I joined this piece a few times, I had the desire to run against the mass, to literally turn around and stir up the mass. :) but that would have been quite literal. I think the subtle and yet strong changes make that more visible.

Our common point, the diversity of people and cultures: What I really also liked about this project and opportunity is the huge diversity of people — their backgrounds, cultures, languages, skin colours, ages, etc. I was fascinated by the diversity of people all coming together to share one special experience and to join the mass. The mass has always been something I find quite frightening, not least because of my own country's history, (being German) — I would never by free will join a mass and yet I did because I saw a lot of things happening in this combination. After all surpassing the individual fight to see that we need and enhance each other. Every person ran with their own mindset, their own struggle, their own experiences, their own breathing, body weight, condition however in fact to support the bigger act. In fact it didn't matter, we all belonged together and created something new. we made something visible, with all that we are even though I'm sure every person had their own reasons to run, their own “YES, i will do this.” And a lot of people got clarity out of that.

Choreomundus: What is your own position, perhaps a motivation on your part. How did this concept of the individual vs. mass movement emerge? The project itself may have a universal tone, or it cuts across human existence.

Fanny: I guess the biggest driving factor was that I had made 2 music videos with a friend of mine for the protests in Gezi Parc, Taksim Square in Istanbul in the early summer of 2013. These music videos for the people and against Erdogan suddenly went viral and had huge unexpected resonance. The people said we had expressed what they felt and used it partially as a hymn for the mass. They demanded more work within a short period of time. My friend coming from Istanbul himself worked days and night and was personally very involved and I was myself involved in a very personal other project at that time that took all my focus and time. We got into a clash because I needed to focus on my own project and didn't have the energy to do so many projects at the same time. The projects for revolutionary social movements have to go quick and quicker and more and more once you're in. I couldn't serve this need anymore and was struggling between my own expression and existence and physical and mental energy and between serving the people and what the people needed and wanted. I felt a huge dilemma but couldn't be in so many places at the same time so I had to take care of myself and quit the video productions for the protests in Istanbul. I guess this was a starting point to make a project like this. I finished this project in early 2014 and then went to Bosnia for 7 months also confronting the same struggle again: to what extent do you leave your individual existence behind to join the mass? This was in Istanbul with protests and in Sarajevo also not only with protests but also with a natural catastrophe in form of a huge flood devastating 2/3rds of the country. How do you deal as an empathetic individual and human to situations like this? As an artist? Do you continue to make your art

to communicate to the outside or do you leave that behind to join the people and do what they need? When are you an artist and when are you a human? Can we even split it? And when does which side in you have priority?

My intention was indeed to make people feel the mass and reflect on themselves while feeling and seeing the mass move in a different perspective. feel the power, the attraction but also the exhaustion and struggle. The big fight and question for me was also if the individual can maintain itself in the mass or not, and in fact from the moment the big mass joins you almost entirely lose sight on the individual. However it's still there and gives what it has and wants to give at each moment and with that influences the mass, but the mass at the same time influences the individual.

How do you guys deal with this topic? What power and position do you give the individual and the group? and how do you build your structure among this essential element?

Choreomundus: We are dance anthropology students and dancers coming from six different countries who are in a constant search for constructing bridges between us and our cultures.

We are still in the process of creating the final performance that will be presented in Helsinki. We have been discussing and sharing ideas about how to embody the questions we raised. For instance, we work in between the levels of the cultural or personal stereotypes and personal stories. Each of us is responsible for developing an idea, or a set of ideas, and propose games, improvisation tasks and movement materials to the group. For instance, we have been working on stereotypical gestures, ways of walking, and manner of greeting. We have some movement habits that are derived from our cultures, but also some that are characteristic of ourselves. We combine those materials with our own dance backgrounds,

in which sometimes we discover points of connection and similarities. We also use our languages and voices to create a soundscape in which the meaning fades in favour to the sonority.

A common thing that we six share is a sense of wonder — a curiosity on how the “other” perceive “you”, or perhaps, how the “you” constructs the “I”. An impetus of our project is to uncover the personal identity vis-a-vis the cultural identity (or national identity?) that we need to face and deal with in our everyday lives. Having an international cohort of students in a programme like Choreomundus lets us engage with our differences and similarities, of course through our movement practices and traditions. It always starts, perhaps with discussing about stereotypes, and it is always interesting to know how these are being (re/de)constructed via an engagement with the “other”. The “individual” is in a constant negotiation with the “group”; each comes from a varied spectrum of experiences which the group should make use of, so the process is very open. We make it a point that the “individual” (i.e. Olia/Belarus; Shanny/Malaysia; Kinga/Hungary; Signa/Italy; Diana/Columbia; Bryan/Philippines) is not being eaten by the “group” (the intersection of our chosen theme), at the same time, the “group” balances the “individual”.

Talking about the creation process of the performance, we had the question on how to organize ourselves, in order to always have something when we are in the studio. We decided that we didn't want one single leader, but the risk of having no leading at all was then to be very dispersive. That's why we chose to have an open shifting-leading, where each of us is in charge of preparing something for the others — an idea, a game, some movement materials, or a reflection that could be materialized. The group balances the individual in order not to fall into a one way leadership; the individual nourishes the group with her/his proposal. Yet, we are a group — a group of

friends, and not a mass, so it is easier not to disappear. Through making the leading shift, we oblige ourselves not to be totally absorbed into the group. Of course we have crossed tensions in the creation process, and I (Signa) think that we have little by little tried to find strategies to work together.

Fanny: I find it very interesting to see how you shift roles between the individual and the group during your creative process. After all I think one cannot exist without the other — we do depend on each other and through a right balance, a balance that enables us to CREATE and Construct something big and bigger can come into existence. However with this fine lines between individual and groups or even masses, when the balance disappears and the individual drowns in group or mass dangerous things have happened all throughout mankind. I think the way you work is beautiful to give each person the chance to bring something into the group and then the group can dive into it but also go out of it and reflect again. This is also essential to keep the workflow well. I myself have also joined the mass movement of the performance and i have done 5 performances with them until I stepped out of the mass to get back to my individual base and to reflect on it, to be able to make a video work about it. Neither sides would have made this possible, it was essential for me to dive into it and feel it fully to step out of it again and create something new out of the experiences. If I would have only ran with the mass it wouldn't have been it and if i would have only watched from the outside it also wouldn't have been it. I had and wanted to share sides to get the full picture :) So essentially this is our core I guess: to find the balance between the individual with all that it brings in culture, history, identity, movement and voice and the dynamics of the individuals in a group :)

I cant wait to meet you all and see the project develop!