

EXPANDING THE VOCABULARY

ABOUT A BOOK OF AN ARTISTIC RESEARCH PROJECT

By Sabina Holzer

Nikolaus Gansterer, Emma Cocker, Mariella Greil (Eds.): *Choreo-Graphic Figures – Deviation from the Line*. Berlin; Wien: De Gruyter; Edition Angewandte, 2017.

*“Therefore, if we are using dance as a metaphor
for the overcoming of gravitation as well as for artistic invention
– its unpredictable ability to ‘turn’ and its flexibility –
we have to understand in equal measure how its moves and movements,
its metamorphoses and passages are based on performative acts
which again are likewise enabled and limited by the boundaries
of space, time, practice, and bodies.” [1]*

(Dieter Mersch: “Figuration / Defiguration. For A Dialectic of Choreography”)

Choreo-Graphic Figures – Deviation from the Line is a publication by Nikolaus Gansterer, Emma Cocker and Mariella Greil in relation to their three years artistic research project with the same title, supported by the Austrian Science Fund FWF in the context of its PEEK programme. [2] The book is a wide and rich compendium of reflections circling around the questions, stimulations and frictions of a trans-disciplinary – or, as the key-researchers, quoting Brian Massumi, suggest, an “infra-disciplinary” [3] – artistic research, in relation to the different media of the three key researchers: drawing, writing and dancing / choreographing.

During these three years Gansterer, Cocker and Greil invited different collaborators for a series of Methods-Labs for live experimentation, and lectured in symposia and teaching workshops. Thereby they constructed this body of thought as a texture of different writings, drawings and photos. They additionally set out to create a ‘workbook’ which should and does function as a score. The score unfolds while reading the book and is articulated as such at the end “How to play the score”. [4] The publication – as they explicitly express – is not the documentation of the project, even though the many (beautiful) photos and video stills easily could be read as documents. The researchers themselves call it “an archival representation” and a “choreo-graphic assemblage in and of itself, interweaving the textual and visual, the sayable and the shown”. [5]

A double drift

The book with its 400 pages is an appealing object. The cover already is like a soft embrace, a coat, a cape and maybe even a code around the book. It unfolds to a drawn map of content and an index of words. “The publication *Choreo-Graphic Figures – Deviation from the Line* can be read in different directions, there is more than one ‘way in’. Its unfolding narrative is not only linear but also diagrammatic, associative, rhizomatic, entangled. The book is also intended as a score that can be performed or played as much as read.” [6]

Already before the book is open, one is invited to follow one’s tactile and aesthetic impulses: to leaf light-hearted through the 5 cm thick layers of paper, feel the texture of the pages and be guided by their soft, warm colours of egg-white, beige, pink and blue. Probably the mind zooms in because of a combination of attractions: either the colour of the pages combined with beautiful mysterious suggestive maps and figures, which again are at times folded to fit in the book and

expand its concept; combined with the writing in different layouts; combined with the photos of people moving in a space with objects put in relation with some poetic lines giving a hint what these people might have sensed and experienced at that moment. Or one might be triggered to stop and read because the promises of titles like “Becoming Undisciplinary” or “Embodied Diagrammatics”, or the name of one of the authors, [7] whose fields of expertise span philosophy, artistic research, art history, critical theory, curating, theatre, dance and performance theory, sound culture, system analysis, and the intersection of media theory and theory of space.



At the Method Lab of Choreo-graphic Figures: Deviations from the line, hosted by TQW, 2016.

Foto: Victor Jaschke

Simona Koch did the graphic design and the concept of the book in close collaboration with the key researchers. [8] One becomes immediately entangled in the rhizomatic structure, but also clear orientation is provided through the colour code of the book: the pages of essays and critical thoughts are marked beige, reflections on “How-ness”, “When-ness” and “Where-ness” on beige pages; “Practices” are offered on pink, and “Figures” on blue. And there is always the table of contents, the prologue in order not to get lost – though ‘getting lost’ is in fact highly recommended here.

The book is a carefully crafted object and suggests that the artistic collaborative research of *Choreo-Graphic Figures – Deviation from the Line* also was a thoroughly conducted “theory in practice” or “practice in theory”; a complex “double drift” within “thinking through art practice” [9] in order to trace the relation of thought in and with different media. It navigates along the experiences of the research project and translates these experiences into (meta-)texts around issues of collaboration, trans-/infra-disciplinarity and phenomenological micro-processes of perception.

Tracing the process of decision-making

These phenomenological micro-processes were at the core of this artistic research. With a radical choice to investigate within the introspective experience during which art practice takes stock of its own processes and procedures,

Gansterer, Cocker and Greil set out to consequently trace the process of decision-making. The micro-shifts of awareness, which might resonate in the way the artist engages with his/her artistic material and which causes shifts of atmosphere in space and interactions. Therefore all live explorations were recorded on video and photographed. In order to mark these subjective perceptual micro-processes, a “practice of clicking” was developed: little sounds made with the tongue. This pre-verbal utterance was used as a registering sign, as the effort to express these appearing sensations in an appropriate word could easily destroy the experience. With this clicking method the researchers were able to trace these moments when they were watching the video, so that they could analyse, start naming and notating.

“Matter, materia, and ‘matters’ pose extreme challenges for the research on connections, inner and outer relations and conditions as well as their semiotic character, organisation, and performativity.” [10]
(Helmut Ploebst: “Deviations in the System of Cultural Bookkeeping”)

Choreo-Graphic Figures – Deviations from the Line thus engages in the different layers of communication between living systems and follows the thought that “communication which enables the formation of matter already are autopoietic, that is, self-creating – sustaining systems.” [11] In this way the title of the project and the book is ‘the programme’. Every word of it, carefully examined and contextualised, unfolds and propels the reader into the process and, due to the rich reference frame, the book simultaneously invites one to relate and reflect one’s own (artistic) practice.

Consequently staying connected to the trans-/infra-disciplinary process, the artistic practices expand and deviate, as does the terminology: The “choreo-graphic” works as a concept related to “chorein” and “to those arts which form movement as much as they endow it with meaning.” [12] With this focus on movement the human body comes into play even in drawing and writing; modes of activities which are not commonly related to the body. The “choreo-graphic” appoints to a constructed situation of witnessed activities. Also the term ‘witness’ is modified here as “wit(h)ness”. It refers to a notion of being-with – a way of observing which emphasises participation and does not pretend the possibility of an “outside, objective” watcher. Or, as P.A. Skantze puts it: “A methodology of care’, I have written, is at the heart of the practice of being a spectator. When in practice we are called to respond – what did you think? – then we must remember and invent. Invention is the art in the weaving. Description itself, particularly description in service of recounting and collaborating, is a form of critical immanent attention.” [13] Therefore the hyphen in “choreo-graphic” is chosen to announce the “precariousness and fragility” [14] of the process and criticises the spectacle with its machinery of “expositions, of control and appropriation”. [15]

The terms “figure” and “figuring” are reflected by the researcher in a separate chapter, and are recurring terms throughout the different essays and statements. “Figure” and “figuring” rather refer to a mind pattern which sometimes rises and settles, sometimes rises and disappears again. (Within the field of contemporary dance and performance one might relate it to a “state of mind”.) The term “figure” though bridges the abstract and the concrete, tempts the mind to travel between notions of form and formlessness, bypasses psychology and stays with the perceptual and imaginative without giving a concrete shape. This is emphasised by combining the noun “figure” with verbs, like an entirely provisional, alphabetical list of possible figures suggests: figure of arriving, figure of binding, figure of bonding, ... figure of fabricating, ... figure of remembering. Nevertheless these figures are as fleeting as they seem, they were extracted and are offered as structural key-elements for an artistic process – “Elemental Figures”, “Emphatic Figures” and “Transformative Figures” – within the book.

What if figures were to choreo-graph? [16]

*What if a line becomes a movement or a sound;
 what if language is danced;
 what if words are drawn rather than written?*

One can get in contact with the complex development of these different figures through the poetically tender and fierce drawings and maps by Nikolaus Gansterer. He deviates between drawing and writing, between instrument and object, between two-dimensional surface and space – and last but not least between mind and body. Gansterer drew like a seismograph translating words, sensations and atmosphere into lines on paper and objects in space throughout the whole process. For the book he made a selection of these drawings and created a system of notation which can be used to see what kind of qualities of movement might emerge in space when these lines are (re-)activated.



Nikolaus Gansterer: Elemental figures map, 2017.

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It was Emma Cocker who opened her authorship through a rigorous practice of transcribing conversations. For her, conversations are materials. [17] Words are examined, touched from different sides, put into relation with each other, put into artistic, aesthetical, philosophical context to open up to different meanings. In combination with Gansterer's delicate drawings, our thoughts are invited to a horizontal flight interrelating language, geometrical abstraction and fragile diagrammatic figures. While micro-motions resonate through space, echoing as a collaborative membrane, and spreading through the pages of the book.

Mariella Greil choreographed photos and video-stills to put them in relation with poetic comments of an "I" translating sensorial experiences into words suggesting what might have happened then. The experiential character of her writing creates a soft landing base for one's thoughts – and occasionally wonder what "really" may have happened during that time, in that studio space? To which situation do the photos refer to? What happened how, when and where, with what

consequences? What will be the resonance of all those articulations, all those thoughts? The offered “Practices”, exercises of attention, notation, conversation, wit(h)nessing and the score invite one to explore where such a journey might lead to.

The contributions of the invited collaborators travel the folds and cracks of the process. They elaborate, embrace and highlight this particular time, in this specific space, with this particular constellation for the field of artistic research and collaboration on a broader level. Unlined lines, thingness, figurations, questions, drifts, sensorial bodies, sediments and sensitivities, aesthetics and cultural bookkeeping, prints and sprints, undisciplinary listening and scoring fragile figures are springboards to deepen the reflection of one’s own (artistic) practice. Other micro-cosmoses provide different models of thought and (performative) concepts of language, and therefore inform different per-formative concepts of performing.

Choreo-Graphic Figures – Deviations from the Line is a strong and inspiring position for trans-disciplinary artistic research and collaboration. Anyone who is interested in the art field to develop, grow, and connect to past-future visions should support artistic research and create possibilities for it to truly experiment and reach for the unknown. The financial and institutional support helped *Choreo-Graphic Figures – Deviations from the Line* to be recognised as a prestigious project. But any carefully and thoughtfully practiced collaborative artistic research leads to a “founding dimension of ethics”, which is, as Adrian Heathfield expresses, “... you do not choose for the other. You must respond to the other that you do not choose.”

The otherness of the other, of oneself, is always waiting to leap into the process unexpectedly. “The danger with privileging connection over disconnection is that you end up in sterile harmony. But what you want to sustain in ethics or aesthetics is movement, change, friction and differentiation. That is, what is happening in the social reality.” So what else can be more important than creating spaces and conditions inside and outside of institutions for such experimentation: exercising the courage to engage in processes of transformation ethically and aesthetically, processes not appropriated and exploited by the market and the spectacle.

<http://www.choreo-graphic-figures.net>

Fußnoten:

[1] ^ Gansterer, Nikolaus; Cocker, Emma; Greil, Mariella (Eds.): *Choreo-Graphic Figures – Deviations from the Line*. Berlin; Wien: De Gruyter; Edition Angewandte, 2017; p. 117.

[2] ^ Cf. <http://www.fwf.ac.at/en/research-funding/fwf-programmes/peek/>

[3] ^ Ibid.: “[...] *the relation of a mode of activity to others is immanent to its exercise, – it’s not inter – it’s infra. [...] It’s not necessarily the case that a discipline that claims right over a mode of activity actually takes it to the limits. More often, it curtails any movement to the limit.*” (p. 39)

[4] ^ Ibid., p. 382–383.

[5] ^ Ibid., p. 6.

[6] ^ Ibid., cover.

[7] ^ Gansterer Nikolaus, Cocker Emma, Greil Mariella, Andreas Spiegl, Krassimira Kruschkova, Brandon LaBelle, Dieter Mersch, Christine De Smedt, P.A. Skantze, Arno Böhlér, Adrian Heathfield, Alex Arteaga, Jörg Piringler, Helmut Ploebst, Werner Moebius, Karin Harrasser, Lilia Mestre, Catherine de Zegher, Erin Manning, Alva Noë, Gerhard Dirmoser, Christoph Dell.

[8] ^ Simona Koch: <http://www.en-bloc.de/> and <http://www.gestaltgebung.eu/>

[9] ^ Gansterer, Nikolaus; Cocker, Emma; Greil, Mariella (Eds.): Ibid., p. 9.

[10] ^ Ibid., p. 296.

[11] ^ Ibid.

[12] ^ Ibid., p. 111.

[13] ^ Ibid., p. 176.

[14] ^ Ibid., p. 115.

[15] ^ Ibid., p. 115.

[16] ^ Ibid., p. 52.

[17] ^ Cf. Cocker, Emma: 'Writing Without Writing: Conversation as Material'. In: Hilevaara, Katja; Orley, Emily (Eds.): *The Creative Critic: Writing About/As Practice*. London and New York: Routledge 2018.

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