

Review of 12 NOFOD Conference Expanding Notions: Dance, Practice, Research, Method Reykjavík 28–31 of May 2015



*Participants at the conference dinner.
Photo: Sesselja G. Magnúsdóttir*

A sunny, but cold May afternoon in Reykjavík researchers and practitioners from the Nordic Countries, Germany, Lithuania, Canada, New Zealand, The Netherlands, U.S.A and U.K. met at Tunglið—the new dance studio of the Iceland Academy of the Arts (IAA), situated right in the centre of the city—to register for the 12th NOFOD conference EXPANDING NOTIONS and to see #PRIVATEPUSSY, the graduation performance of the dance students.

The cheerful energy emerged as people met and gave notice of the warm and intimate atmosphere which from then on characterised the whole conference. The many hugs and handshakes indicated that a number of the participants already knew each other quite well, and the existence of a „NOFOD-family“ became evident by the exchange of goodbyes at the ending of the conference: A caring and welcoming family for new as well as old members.

For the conference committee in Iceland it was a pleasure to have the possibility to give the conference

guests glimpse of what is going on within the Icelandic dance field. This was especially appropriate for the thematic focus of the conference being the practice of dance creation and teaching as the main base which artistic and other dance research draws on. The formal reception was therefore held at Reykjavík's City Theatre where the conference participants after a light dinner were invited to see *Blæði*, the spring performance of the Icelandic Dance Company.

In Iceland dance is a fairly new as a subject at university level. Few Icelanders have completed their MA in dance, and therefore, we are still waiting for a PhD in dance. At Iceland Academy of the Arts there are discussions going on about how research in arts and arts education, including dance, can be developed within the university, focusing on the perspectives of the artist instead of the conventional terms of the academic research tradition. From these discussions

the NOFOD conference was conceived, by connecting to the basic rationale of dance research and dance practice and how artistic practice can be seen as a way of research. It was also in relation to this rationale that those interested in participating in the conference were encouraged to present not only conference papers but also more practical presentations. This resulted in that nine out of 34 presentations were practical in form of lecture demonstrations, works in progress and workshops.

The title of the conference was *EXPANDING NOTIONS: Dance–Practice–Research–Method* and in the vision statement it was stated that: “This conference will address the multiple understandings of methodologies in dance practice and research, in order to contest pre-conceived conceptions of methods and revise our understanding of doing and knowing.” (Accessed August 2, 2015. <http://akademia.is/526-call-for-proposals-nofod>.) The encompassing title and the overall theme was intended to appeal to the broad community of NOFOD as methodologies in research

and practice should always be challenged in order to keep us conscious of the understanding of doing and knowing being culturally constructed.

The bodily approach to dance research was our main guidance when the NOFOD board was choosing keynotes for the conference. It was decided to invite two scholars from the Nordic countries instead of someone from outside the community, two who have had strong influences on dance research within the area as well as being internationally recognised. This choice was reflected in the tendencies that could be found in the program recurring as the main themes: Dance education and dance as a theatre art.

Efva Lilja has been a key figure in the Nordic countries as an active force nationally and internationally, improving the conditions for artists to undertake research in their artistic practices. Former Artistic Director of the E.L.D. Company based in Stockholm, Professor of Choreography and Vice-

From Black Marrow by Erna Ómarsdóttir & Damien Jalet. Photo: Bjarni Grímsson





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Chancellor of DOCH, she was the Expert Advisor on Artistic Research at the Swedish Ministry of Education and research in 2014, and author of the government report “*Research, Art, Empowerment—The Artist as Researcher*” (reviewed on page 59, editor’s note). Pointing towards the political issues regarding the bureaucracies of culture and academia, the rising role of the curators in the restructuring of intra-artistic hierarchies, and the effect of politics on the national and regional level create the ground for informal economies, Efva Lilja’s opening keynote lecture “Why Claim to be Dancing?” offered a variety of thought-provoking viewpoints to the value of dance. Underlining the importance of knowledge-production of both artists-as-researchers and scientific researchers to push forward the methodologies in basic artistic education, she also emphasized how cross-disciplinary work offers dance room to expand, within the larger artistic scope, as an alternative to what she called “the industry’s pacifying bling-bling”. Stressing the importance of flexible, open structures for the creation

of dance, the performative art institution’s resistance to change can be found in their hierarchical organization models and political mandates, but to Efva Lilja this emphasises how institutions need relevant artistic management. Also, how philosophers and sociologists together with artists can participate in advisory boards. In making room for artists to develop their knowledge, she expressed her criticism of a limiting horizontality and demanded political positioning, warning us of how commercialism effects power hierarchies and can risk holding ownership over concepts and movements within the art of dance. The word “Dance” which she repeatedly voiced in between her main points during her lecture could sound as an imperative, a question, or just a matter of fact. Resounding through our bodies, it was very symbolically through verbal language urging us as to push forward our field of interest: Dance.

The same way *Eeva Anttila* has used a practical approach in her research within dance pedagogy. Eeva

Anttila (Ed.Lic, Doctor of Arts in dance) who works as a professor in dance pedagogy at the University of the Arts Helsinki, Finland, has been actively involved in national and international dance and arts education organizations and journals. She served as the Chair of Dance and the Child International (2009–2012), and has published several articles and book chapters nationally and internationally. She has been the editor of the Nordic Journal of Dance: Practice, Education and Research and currently being the co-editor of the International Journal of Education in the Arts. Eeva Anttila's main research interests include dialogical and critical dance pedagogy, embodied learning, embodied knowledge and practice-based/artistic research methods.

In her keynote presentation **On be(coming) and connecting: Participatory approaches to dance research and pedagogy** Eeva Anttila pointed out how new theories used in academic research open up for a new possibilities for investigating in dance practice as they uncover how human meaning-making is always connected to the physical, material conditions of life. Meaning arises through manifold actions and interactions rather than in discourse or symbolic order. These approaches reveal how social change and transformation can be made through dance. According to Eeva Anttila, it can be fruitful in this context to connect art and pedagogy as artistic-pedagogical events can foster connectedness and participation.

*Panel discussion about artistic research.
From the left: Per Roar, Christina Blicher-Johansen,
Steinunn Knútsdóttir, Eeva Anttila, Eflva Lilja.
Photo: Sesselja G. Magnúsdóttir*



By creating situations rather than objects, and seeing performance as on-going events, it should be possible to encourage action and interaction, participation and affect.

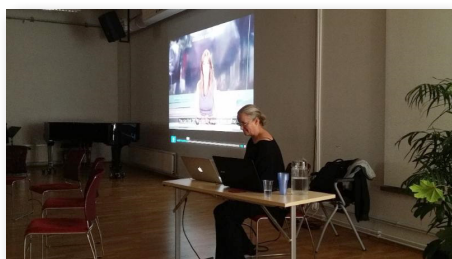
Eeva Anttila also contributed to the conference by participating in two other presentations very much related to her keynote presentation and the theme of the conference. In cooperation with Teija Löytönen and Anita Valkeemäki she talked about their experimentation on how embodied collaboration could help them in their academic work. That is, instead of sitting and discussing research subjects, they meet in a dance studio improvising on simple patterns, everyday actions, verbal reflections and experimental writings.

She then in cooperation with Hanna Järvinen and Leena Rouhiainen introduced their article about artistic research in an anthology on research methods utilized by Finnish dance researchers.

As mentioned above, more practical presentations could be found on this year's conference program compared to earlier; therefore we have selected two examples of practical presentations; a workshop and a lecture-demonstration, to give an impression of the variety and scope of themes within the ongoing practice of Nordic dance research.

Joban Borghäll is a teacher in Performance, Laban Movement Analyses, Movement Communication and Dance at the University of Southern Denmark, a teacher of body expression, body language and

*Eflva Lilja delivering an inspiring keynote
Photo: Sesselja G. Magnúsdóttir*





drama pedagogics at The Danish National School of Performing Arts, as well as the creator of Decenter—an institute for movement communication. His workshop “Sensing and make sense” was a practical investigation in different pedagogical methods to deal with sensing and making sense of the dance and discussed how to stimulate the students’ awareness and reflections in a (creative) dance class, through basic task oriented exercises. The exercises had a special focus on contact and interaction and emphasized the value of both awareness and the reflection on how we value and evaluate “the other”. With reference to Martin Buber, we questioned whether we improvised together in an “I and You” relation or in an “I and It” relation? Transferring these experiences from the studio to everyday life and its many relational meetings, Johan asked:

What is the impact of the movement experience? The experience has two modes: momentary sensations and lasting impression, referring to Hans-Georg Gadamer: We appreciate the immediate

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sensation of movement. But do we provide space-of-awareness for the special imprint of the experience, so the experiences bring a special kind of lasting significance, an immersion? Friedrich Nietzsche says that, “in a deep human being all experiences remain longer.”

The workshop suggested that being aware of one’s movements in dance may lead to a change in movement quality both in dance (performance) and life—a perspective that might be developed more within dance research and practice in the future.

Hanna Pajala-Assefa’s lecture demonstration “The body as an instrument and the pursuit of authentic self” presented her ongoing artistic research on body and sound, i.e. the body as an instrument. A contemporary dance artist with an MA degree from TEAK in choreography, she works in various disciplines; choreography, performance, dance film and production. In 2013 she was awarded the “Finnish

Dance Achievement"-Award, for her groundbreaking work in founding and developing Loikka-dance film festival. In her research, artists from dance and music disciplines collaborate exploring the creation of live interaction between movement and sound. Can one's body manifest itself in an instrumental form, and how can this practice be transferred into contemporary performance? She approached the research from two observation points: 1) How do we enable the body's instrumentality? 2) How does the experience of moving alter when the body is treated as an instrument?

The demonstration began with Pajala-Assefa and her assistant improvising as we entered the black box. There were microphones placed on the floor in front of the dancers and also in the ceiling. The sound went from the body's movements being registered in a very subtle and credible way, to being amplified and altered by a sound technician. The absence of the sound of breathing was striking. After the improvisation the audience/participants could ask questions or make comments, and a recurring remark was that the distortion of the sound somewhat reduced the quality of the experience for the audience. The dancers explained how the sound influenced their immediate exploration of the movement and how this is thought to influence the continuation of the process. This lecture demonstration appeared to be an excellent format for presenting Pajala-Assefa's work-in-progress, but also to demonstrate what artistic research can be and the shape it can take.

Through these examples of the many themes and presentation forms this year's NOFOD conference consisted of, we can conclude that there was great range of themes which were addressed, not only artistic and educational, but also bringing in historical, experiential, methodological, political and cultural perspectives in this cross-disciplinary field which characterizes dance research. The number of presentations arising to 34, we hope the next conference will show results of this year's engaging

and important exchange.

NOFOD has fostered dance research in, about and on dance in its broadest sense from the beginning, which makes the NOFOD community diverse and vital. As formulated on the homepage, accessed on August 2, 2015: "The Nordic Forum for Dance Research, NOFOD, is a non-profit organization that promotes collaboration between dance scholars and practitioners. This it does by arranging seminars and conferences as well as spreading information through discussions, performances and publications on dance. The purpose of the organisation is to enhance, empower and bring together diverse forms of dance research, knowledge and practice especially in the Nordic context." The NOFOD conferences have usually mirrored this variety somewhat different to in Reykjavík where dance as an art form was given more focus than usual without this traditionally being the aim within a NOFOD context. However, due to this year's two main themes this may be contested on analysis of the program, as dance research and dance education deals with dance in a broad sense, the relation between education and dance as an art form being so interconnected. This being said, the identity of the dancer is very much related to his or her education, not, of course, to exclude the choreographer. The choreography's artistic outcome will always be marked by the sum of this input.

It has been decided that the next conference will be held in Gothenburg Sweden in 2017 and the theme will hopefully be announced soon. The authors of this article are looking forward to meeting the NOFOD family members there and are excited to participate in the further expansion of the notions of dance and dance research.

*Sesselja Magnúsdóttir, Anette Sture Iversen
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