

Intention: Questions regarding its role in choreography

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Abstract:

What do you see when you watch a dance? Do you try to figure out what the choreographer was trying to say? Does that influence the way you evaluate the piece? Or do you limit your observations to the dance itself? These questions are at the heart of how we understand what a work of art means. Our attitude toward the role of intention not only influences how we go about interpreting and evaluating the works of others, but how we go about teaching our students and the way we make dances ourselves.

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Article:

What do you see when you watch a dance? Do you try to figure out what the choreographer was trying to say? Does that influence the way you evaluate the piece? Or do you limit your observations to the dance itself? These questions are at the heart of how we understand what a work of art means. Our attitude toward the role of intention not only influences how we go about interpreting and evaluating the works of others, but how we go about teaching our students and the way we make dances ourselves.

I have been considering these issues since the recent reprinting of my paper, *Choreography as a Mode of Inquiry: A Case Study*, first published in *Impulse* in October 1996.¹ The article suggests that making dances has important similarities to conducting interpretive kinds of research, specifically because both processes are heavily involved with subjectivity and personal points of view.

In rereading the journal entries I used for that paper, I have been struck by the implications of the comparison. Traditional research calls for a hypothesis before beginning, while interpretive inquiry allows for the interplay between form and content, procedure and direction, both evolving together. In this way, the research process becomes one of creative discovery, in which the emerging form of the study can lead the researcher in new directions.

To make the analogy with choreography, I only had to look as far as my own creative process. The article points out that for choreography to be considered inquiry, it is generally accepted that it must be seen as adding to knowledge. It must enlarge “perception by seeking new interpretations of the familiar and finding fresh metaphors to sharpen our vision...because knowledge comes through perception and understanding.”¹

Building on these ideas, the subject of this paper is choreographic or artistic intention and its importance— both to the viewer and the artist. Most of us have been taught to begin the choreographic process with an idea or a statement of purpose; I wonder whether that is always the best way. Does an artist always know what knowledge will emerge from a finished work? The actual relationship of intent to the process of choreography is open to question. Should the artist’s intention have a guiding influence throughout the choreographic process? Does this mean that dance-making is a set of tasks carried out by the artist to achieve a predetermined goal? Or does it matter just when during the process the idea comes?

Is it valid for an artist to allow the choreographic process to determine its own direction? Is there a “best” way to work? How much bearing should the artist’s intention have on the way the finished work is seen and evaluated? My aim here is to reexamine the original journal entries from my previous paper in light of these issues, and compare my experiences with what other choreographers have to say.

As a novice, I used to worry that I rarely had an idea for a dance. To this day, when I am asked what a new dance is going to be about, I hardly ever know. Although now I see that my way of working is fairly typical, for a long time I was under the illusion that my process was different from how most choreographers work. Somehow I had come to believe that most artists – certainly most highly skilled artists – begin each new piece knowing in advance what they are going to make: that they either set out problems for themselves or work to address certain issues.

My own process is nothing like that. Rather than starting with something I want to say, I usually begin with choreographic patterns and ideas about structure, formal ideas that I explore and put together. This process continues until, in some way, I know that the overall design of the dance has found a way to resolve itself. I get a deep feeling of knowing that it is finally right, and it is often only then – and sometimes not until long after then – that I know what the piece is really about. This is such an intuitive procedure that there is no way to rush it. For me, the meaning seems to lie buried in the structure and slowly rises to the surface as I resolve the form.

I now realize that quite a number of choreographers approach their work this way. Anna Sokolow claims that she never plans a dance. She writes, “I do it, look at it, and then say: ‘Yes, I see what I am trying to do.’” Once the theme becomes clear, she says, she then intensifies it “by focusing on it.”² That sounds familiar to me, what I call starting blind and gradually coming to clarity.

Paul Taylor says he works this way too:

If I waited for inspiration, I'd never get anything done.... I just get busy in the studio and sometimes when I start I haven't got a clue what we're going to do. I just start. If it doesn't lead anywhere, then I start over. But once you get going it doesn't have to be the beginning or the middle or the end of a dance. I find that it takes over if you let it.³

Critic Arlene Croce characterizes Mark Morris as a virtuoso choreographer who concentrates on design while allowing the meaning to follow. She describes his process as one of “generating content from form wherever he happens to find it satisfyingly deployed.” Morris himself agrees, saying, “Beauty for me is usually structure.”⁴

Dance professor Alma Hawkins has described this way of working as an inward search for order, a process of giving shape to experience which can result in both knowledge and communication. Underlying this way of working, according to Hawkins, is an unconscious “search for truth” (page 79).⁵ Among the choreographers she surveyed were Sybil Shearer who said, “I open myself – wait. It just comes” (page 77),⁵ and Alwin Nikolais, who said simply:

It speaks. I have the feeling of the germinal seed and, once you have discovered the seed, it has a character that dictates its own continuity. Once you understand that, you allow it to grow on its own. You don't choreograph – just stay out of the way (page 78).⁵

These quotes seem to say that at least some choreographers often have no conscious intent to communicate a particular meaning when they make a dance, though they may have formal ideas they want to explore. This is not the way the creative process is commonly understood, however. Many critics and philosophers talk about artistic intention as if it were a given. Their concern is with where the authority, the real meaning, of a work lies. Is it in what the artist was intending to do? Or does one find it within the complex structure of the work itself?

The intentionalist point of view insists that every artist works with a definable intention that is irrevocably linked with what her works mean. Steven Knapp and Walter Benn Michaels are perhaps the most extreme proponents of this viewpoint. They write that, “the meaning of a text [or dance] is simply identical to the author's intended meaning.”⁶ According to them, the viewer's main job is to try to discover what the choreographer intended to say. Reading an alternative interpretation into a piece “becomes another case of rewriting and is no longer interpretation at all.”

E. D. Hirsch, Jr. has similar ideas. He defines “textual [artistic] meaning as the verbal intention of the author.”⁷ Hirsch considers it possible that meaning might have less to do with the author's mind than with his or her artistic achievement. But in the end, he espouses the intentional point of view on the basis that without knowing what the author meant, it becomes impossible to really understand what a correct interpretation might be. In other words, without the artist's own definition of a work's meaning, there could be more than one correct answer. The door would then be open to subjectivism and relativism, which means that any structurally possible meaning

– any meaning that the design of the dance suggests – could be supported, and Hirsch finds this unacceptable.

For an artist who works the way I do, usually quite some time is spent without any conscious goals except to make a dance. Sometimes I do not even have what Nikolais refers to as the “germinal seed,” and my artistic intention might be limited to considerations of craft and design. Although Doris Humphrey calls “the decision as to the basic idea from which the dance will spring” the most important step in choreographing,⁸ when I start, even this step may lie in the future. At the very beginning there may be nothing more than the desire to begin rehearsals.

Seeing my movement on dancers helps to flesh out ideas and shape the phrases in terms of dynamics and flow. For me, the choreographic process is like a conversation with the dance as it develops. I bring ideas to rehearsal and the dancers are able to make them visible. What they show me then provides new ideas, and so the work progresses. It is a cyclical process, a little like a conversation, and perhaps aptly described by Iredell Jenkins as “vibrating between two poles...described as internalization and externalization, or as insight and embodiment, or as contemplation and concretion. The important point is that these are phases in a cycle that is cohesive and recurrent” (page 12).⁵

Over the summer of 1994 I made a dance called, “Night Between Two Days.” I kept a journal as I worked, hoping to begin understanding my own process a little better, trying to find answers to the questions I had been considering. I have included some of the journal entries here, mining them for ideas, and reflecting on them much as I would the writing of any choreographer. The entry after the first rehearsal illustrates my uncertainty and lack of direction at the beginning of the process:

July 11: After 5-6 sessions in the studio by myself last week, and endless replays of the music, I was glad to finally see the movement, to be able to watch how it blends and flows, to check the rhythmic interplay, and see how each dancer works.

I’ve chosen the music and composed three phrases: one for arms, one for legs, and one for full body. I have a vague sort of costume idea but no clear direction yet – a warm, inclusive mood, active yet open, rhythmic, perhaps ritualistic – but no sense of the form is visible yet.

Principles of craft and compositional tools I learned long ago guide the unfolding of each dance, allowing me freedom to apply ideas based on the circumstances of the moment. Though I am not conscious of it while I work, intellectually I know that my own social and aesthetic values combine with the emerging design to guide the outcome. In all creative work, I believe that ideas and goals evolve according to the mix of cultural and/or physical givens along with information acquired during the process itself. Each dance is unique, a combination of aesthetic choices and the choreographic processes that, each time, are limited by the circumstances. For example, the shape a dance takes may be influenced in varying degrees by the size of the rehearsal studio, the

number of available dancers and their ability level, and the amount of time in which to complete the work.

July 16: After four rehearsals, I have the first section mapped out in my mind, though I'm running into problems trying to keep from using old ideas. I try daily to imagine new formations, to gain a concept for the piece as a whole. So far, the first section is about a community of women. As of today, they dance with each other but for the audience, separating and coming together. At the end, I think five will lie down, leaving one standing. I'm seeing section 2 as a dream or thoughts of the one – maybe she imagines the five.... I'll feel much better when I know where we're going....

This kind of uncertainty in the mind of the creator would seem to present a strong argument against linking artistic intent with the finished work and what it means. However Larry Lavender stated in his article, "Intentionalism, Anti-Intentionalism, and Aesthetic Inquiry,"⁹ that this is not necessarily the case. He writes that, according to intentionalist theory, even if we limit ourselves to studying the intrinsic properties of a work like tempo, spacial design, and so forth, we are still involved with what the artist intended because the artwork has achieved these properties through purposeful acts, no matter how random they seem at the time. A dance must be seen not only as a consequence of a choreographer's intention to make a dance, but of his or her intention to make this particular dance. As a result its true meaning lies in what was intended, and the task of the viewer is to discover what this was.

On the other hand anti-intentionalists argue that artwork must be interpreted apart from any consideration of purpose, because, for one thing, the meaning an artist intends to show may not be what actually emerges from the work of art. Monroe Beardsley notes that this often happens in daily life, judging by the frequency with which one hears, "Maybe that's what you meant, but it's not what you said."¹⁰ Beardsley's contention is that a work of art must be viewed as an object in its own right and that consideration of artistic purpose has no place in interpreting and evaluating such a work. To put it simply, he writes that, "The objective critic's first question, when he is confronted with a new aesthetic object, is not, What is this supposed to be? but, What have we got here?"

July 22: End of second week. I finished the first section, though part of it still looks too much like my last dance. I've tried to just get something out there so I can have material to work with or work from. Today, alone in the studio, I mapped out the first half of the second section with the music. If it works it should be different from my other work in substance, though thematically it's a bit like [two of my older dances] "Spike" and "Lullabye": the bad dream that takes over, a recurring theme for me – one against the group. I wonder if many artists keep recognizing themes in themselves. I wonder if audiences can see it and how easily? It is possible to get away from favorite movement themes, but often I don't see what a dance is going to be about till I'm done. So it's sometimes with chagrin that I see I've been elaborating on an old theme.

Although working blindly can be tortuous, I think this is what draws me to create. Overall, I have come to prefer not knowing where the process will ultimately lead, and I relish interacting with the material, trusting that the trial and error may lead me in new directions. In terms of process, the easiest times are when I begin with a structural idea or image. But with or without the idea, for me making a dance is a search for meaning within the form itself as much as anything else.

How can I get all five dancers from a line into a circle here? Is this the kind of change I want? What effect will making a circle have at this point in the piece? Does that change if I put one dancer in the middle? These are the kinds of questions that guide my process. By striving to create a form that satisfies both emotion and intellect and offers up a key to its own significance, I work to understand the ways in which design speaks.

This process of discovery, of finding personal truth, seems to me the essence of art-making. In a recent interview with critic Arlene Croce, Twyla Tharp described the sense of inquiry involved with choreography, and cited the “not knowing” as a crucial difference between artistic and commercial work. With a new dance, she said,

I have the desire to do it, and that gets me through. A whole lot of things get decided in the making. At some point in the piece, I begin to feel which movements belong and which don't. But the luxury of using up rehearsal time deciding how to proceed isn't given to me with every commission. In commercial work, I'm hired to get results, and I rehearse differently; I enact an effect that has been prescribed by the conditions of the contract. It isn't art. Art is about finding things out.¹¹

Making one's way through periods of uncertainty and discomfort, adjusting to the ambiguities and freedom inherent in the process can be uncomfortable even for the seasoned choreographer.

July 28: End of the third week now and I'm sunk in the certainty that I don't really like this dance. So I've videotaped it and will take the weekend to re-envision it. All week I've been down on myself. Somehow, though, since I've finally admitted that I don't like it, I've felt some hope that I can fix it.

To me this process feels like groping, trying to find my way through trial and error. I see it as a dialogue between myself and the dance, a dialogue in which I try to understand where the choreography wants to go, what the natural, inevitable outcome will be as I allow the intuitive process to complete itself. To make dances in this way, I have to trust that once begun, the dance knows what needs to happen. I have to believe that the dance itself has an “intention,” so to speak, and my job is merely to be sensitive to it and enable it to unfold without forcing any particular conclusion.

August 2: I spent an hour with the video on Saturday watching and rethinking the first section. I took out the symmetry that seemed too formal for the sensuality of the movement, and constructed some group pathways and partnering that seems to work.

Yesterday and today in rehearsal I found myself really pleased with the first section now. It's as though... the first ideas I come up with sometimes are those most recently successful in previous choreography and I have to try them out, realize they don't work here, and go beyond them into something new.

Today we began with changes to Section 2 and still it felt kind of hokey, not an idea that Paul Taylor would have gone ahead with. So I went back and sat in the theater with my music after rehearsal and found ways to repeat the thematic material. And I came up with an idea for the end.

What a great feeling now, to KNOW the ending is right, that it makes the dance okay after all, that the third section now has a reason for being. The piece turns out to be about transformation instead of a nightmare.

This feeling of "Aha!" is one of the major rewards of any discovery. When it comes, I know the dance has determined its course and that I understand how the design needs to be developed and completed. Here, the "Aha!" is an intuitive knowing, a sense of completion and satisfaction, and often, a revelation of meaning within the dance. The process leads to a kind of knowledge that is both subjective and true: an aspect of my reality expressed through choreography. The significance of a dance may be limited to the beauty of design or the structure may open itself up to myriad interpretations. Given the opportunity, I believe that expression finds its shape and the work speaks: content lies within form and meaning within the stable properties that artworks do possess.

But at the same time I do not accept the notion that meaning itself is fixed in any way, and I am suspicious of a consensual, universal truth in art. Understanding varies from culture to culture, age to age. Within any culture, interpretation and perception will differ from person to person as well, based on the differences between people. And within a single life, meaning-making is modified with the growth and development that comes with growing older. So for me, although both art-making and interpretation may be informed by clear structural design, interpretation does not have a "right" answer. I see meaning as an individual response to perception. It is learning to trust one's own interpretation of artistic design, either as creator or observer, that makes the interaction with art exciting and insightful.

The questions that instigated this discussion will probably always be present. Is it important that an artist have a clear intent before beginning a work? Based on my experiences I would have to say no. Does it, in fact, matter when the artist achieves clarity about the work in progress? How much does the success of the artistic product depend on the answer to this question? Again, based on my experience it seems that there is no one "process," and no one "correct" way for us all to work. The either-or concept of intentionalism/antiintentionalism is much too orderly for widespread application to the disorganization inherent in the creative process.

As a viewer, on the other hand, I suspect that knowledge of authorial intent may, like knowledge of historical and cultural context, get in the way of appreciating the work itself. It is interesting to know how artists work, but to my eye, whether or not a work successfully carries out the author's intent does not always have a bearing on its value to me as a viewer.

Does it, then, make a difference in our relationship with the arts to understand the creative process as being one way or another? I think it does, since that understanding necessarily affects the way we make choreography, teach the craft, and evaluate other people's works. I tell my choreography students that as artists it is important to learn to see clearly and that the meaning of what they see lies in the dance they are perceiving.

Perhaps one way of arriving at a personal response to the issue of intention is to ask the question, "what is a dance." Monroe Beardsley makes a strong case for the anti-intentionalist point of view with his answer, which I have adopted as my own. He describes a dance as a gestalt, an entity distinct from the movements that make it up, though it depends on them for its existence. When we see a dance, we see two levels of things at once: the individual movements and the dance that emerges from them. The dance is born out of the elements that make it up. We see the elements, the stillnesses along with the movements, put together in a way that brings another distinct entity into existence.¹²

While watching a dance, creation occurs before our eyes. As we concentrate on the lines and dynamics, the interaction of music and movement, the relationships among dancers, we as viewers become aware, suddenly or gradually, of what they add up to as a whole – and this is not so different from what the artist frequently experiences in the creative process of making a work. For, if the dance itself has been part of the creative process, what they add up to is an event with symbolic resonance and significance beyond the sum of its parts.

The choreographer can, after all, only organize the elements of the dance so that they will make the quality emerge. The powers she works with are, in the end, not her own but those of the natural world, presenting us all with a model of understanding and cooperation between the laws of the universe and human psychology, while revealing the mystery and power of the creative process.

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