

WORKING ON RESEARCH: AN INSIGHT INTO METHODOLOGICAL APPROACHES

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Abstract

This article is part of a wider PhD research looking at how an artistic scene operates during crisis, focusing on specific case studies from contemporary dance in Athens from 2008 to 2016. The research examines the history and transformation of existing infrastructures and government policies during this crisis period and new practices, structures and discourses that have emerged in response to this changing context. The article outlines and discusses the methodological approaches employed to do this research, revealing their significance and examining their complexities through specific examples stemming from the researcher herself and her writing experience.

Keywords

Ethnography; dance; action research; anecdote; present; methodology

Life is not what one lived, but what one remembers
and how one remembers it in order to recount it.
(García Márquez, 2003)

Introduction

Since 2008, Greece has been undergoing a turbulent period – associated with the financial crisis – of social and political instability. This article is part of a wider PhD research entitled *Dance Chronicles from Athens: Artistic Practices, Structures and Discourses in a Period of Crisis* (University of Roehampton, UK, 2018). The overall research examines the ways in which an artistic scene operates in a period of sociopolitical crisis, focusing on particular examples drawn from artists residing and working in Athens. The aim of the research is to outline and illuminate a marginal and understudied dance scene as a case study that contributes, firstly, to ameliorating the artistic practices, structures and the established discourse of contemporary dance in Greece, and, secondly, to stressing how local cultural conditions relate to a broader European context, pointing out similarities and differences. However, this particular article focuses on the methodologies applied for this research, aiming to explore both the advantages and the disadvantages of ethnographic approaches,

especially when the researcher is writing about her own local scene. The main question is this: how to research and write about the artistic scene that you are part of, and what are the major implications of such a choice? Thus, on the one hand, this article stresses the contradictions inherent in ethnographical approaches, and, on the other, reveals and discusses the difficulties of studying contemporary topics. My viewpoint is that researching and writing from the “inside” demands a well-articulated methodological framework, conscious choices as to how to examine one’s own milieu and an awareness of the implications that the research might have on both the community studied and the researcher herself.

Before engaging with the topic of this article, it is important to first give an overview of the research. Thus, firstly, it looks at artistic initiatives that depart from established hierarchical production modes and explore collectivity and collaboration as working modes that can provide an alternative structure based on the premises of being and working with one another. Secondly, it examines the production and staging of dance performances that engage with historical narratives and explore turbulent periods of the Greek past, as a strategy for relating to the present time of the crisis. Thirdly, it discusses the local cultural policy and how it has shaped the institutional field. Fourthly, it studies the role of education and discourse in shaping contemporary dance in Greece. Overall, the research argues that these shifts in artistic practices, structures and discourse illustrate how the contemporary dance scene in Athens is changing, displaying a tendency for experimentation regarding production modes, a desire on the part of these choreographers to create a common ground, to reflect on and restructure their artistic scene, taking into account the social and political context in Greece, raising issues about the role of the artist in such a framework. Therefore, the aim of this research was to examine contemporary dance practices within a shifting landscape in Greece, namely emerging working modes, and to delineate new discourses being generated during the sociopolitical crisis.

Throughout this article and the study, I chose the term *scene* to discuss artistic discourses, structures and practices that are emerging in the local dance milieu. According to Alan Blum (2001, p. 9), the scene is a social and cultural formation with shifting limits that “presupposes a specialized knowledge, access and association” from those who are part of it, while it is also about the values pursued within that scene. The term “scene” is chosen first because it is directly linked to the arts as a physical structure where a work of art is staged; secondly, because the counter-term “Greek dance”, which has been used in other research studies, resonates more with issues of national identity that are not explored here; thirdly, also, because the alternative term, “dance community”, is loaded with many significations on the meaning of community and contradicts the aim of the overall research, which advocates that the local dance milieu is in a process of shaping new common grounds. Finally, the scene is the most accurate translation of the word *σκηνή* used in Greece when studying contemporary dance.

Methodological adventures

My motivation for research stemmed from my personal urge to outline and examine in depth what I had experienced as a shifting artistic scene in my hometown, Athens, and to relate the latter to the central European cultural scene. To do so, I employed ethnography as a method of recording and revealing a vivid web of social constructions and cultural meanings through a close examination and observation of a particular artistic scene in which I am an active agent. From this perspective, I was, on the one hand, implicated in and, on the other hand, a carrier of the knowledge of this scene. Ethnography is a valuable methodology in that it enables personal experience to be incorporated into the research as a reflective process that points to any given cultural system and provides an insight that acts complementarily to other research methods. In response to critical issues raised on the bias of the author, Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011) argue that ethnography is an approach that “acknowledges and accommodates” the voice and influence of the author, instead of ignoring it. Hence, my personal experience as a dance practitioner and theorist who collaborates with some of the choreographers I was researching, but also as a citizen of Athens who is part of societal transformations, was integrated reflectively into my study through ethnographic methods that allow both the artists’ and the researcher’s voices to be represented, and acknowledge the fact that the artists and the researcher bring different fields of knowledge to the project.

An essential part of my research and my chosen approach was ethnographic fieldwork. Thus, I participated and observed ongoing artistic practices, events, choreographic works and rehearsals, in order to familiarise myself with artists’ working practices, to better study their evolving working relations, and to reveal and analyse existing associations between the cultural and the sociopolitical context. Later, I conducted formal one-to-one and collective interviews with artists delineating their intentions, aims and practices. Also, I participated in informal discussions that enabled less formal interactions with others involved, systematically keeping a field journal and a separate notebook to record data so as to investigate, evaluate and contextualise material, as part of document analysis. As a complement to the fieldwork, I used a variety of sources – from video recordings and bibliographical and archival research to newspaper and scientific articles, dance reviews, official printed programmes, dance blogs, rehearsal notes, press releases, email communications, company archives and photographic material.

However much I was thrilled to work with, examine and discuss the particular choreographers, their projects and aims, I was also late in realising that it is also complicated, challenging, emotional, and very demanding to write about and study those with whom you work, even if ethnographic approaches provide a framework and an epistemology.¹ Anthropologist Ruth Behar (1997) argues that the core anthropological methodology, that is participant observation, is utterly dividing and conflicting. It is even more so when you are working at home, examining the

1 Some of the choreographers discussed in the research project are Tzeni Argyriou, Vasso Giannakopoulou, Iris Karayan, Ioannis Mantafounis, Medi Mega, Mariela Nestora and Katerina Skiada.

practices of your colleagues, being both an insider and an outsider of the scene in question, as the dance ethnographer Maria Koutsouba (1999) also attests. Koutsouba (*ibid.*, p. 193) discusses how, whilst doing fieldwork in Greece, her motherland, she experienced a number of difficulties and complexities through this binary of being an insider and an outsider, concluding that the “self as informant” is not simply a methodological device to use at the fieldwork but a valuable knowledge set to be incorporated into the ethnographic text.

This binary was also part of my academic identity, since the research was undertaken through my own participation in a UK postgraduate educational system, its structures, rules and conventions, but at the same time I was a foreigner, with different traditions and other fields of knowledge. In other words, I always placed myself in the vulnerable position of not fitting in, not belonging to one or the other, essentially being out of joint. I was an in-between-disciplines researcher, trained and practicing journalism, while researching and writing on dance, an insider/outsider of the local dance scene, a member of and foreigner to UK academia, lost somewhere in between the lines. However, this doubt and uncertainty of the in-between can be “a productive state of exploration rather than a condition to be resolved” (Lury and Wakeford, 2012, p. 10), as I initially thought. In the end, this fragile in-between became my tool for bringing together different fields of knowledge, theoretical and empirical, and for preserving this fragility no longer as a flaw but as an effective locus of self-reflexivity and criticality that resonates with the complex realities of doing ethnographic research.

Moreover, Behar (1997) argues that in ethnography the native researcher, who studies her own cultural background and heritage, is not only a participant-observer. She is also a vulnerable observer who has to position herself in the field of study, and to take into account how relations with those being observed and emotions impact her research and writing, making evident that ethnographic research is not only about an objective and distanced witnessing. On the contrary, it is a “mode of knowing that depends on the particular relationship formed by a particular anthropologist with a particular set of people in a particular time and place” (*ibid.*, p. 5). That is, Behar acknowledges how vulnerable the researcher is while examining her own milieu and emphasizes that positionality in the particular framework can be beneficial rather than ambiguous. In my case, it was very important while examining the contemporary dance scene in Athens, of which I am part, that it had been the source of my inspiration and that it was actually the motor of my examination. Through the process of researching and writing about the local scene, I became more aware of my own bias, but also my vulnerability and positionality in talking about specific artists, discourses, practices and policies.

Still, I was somehow uneasy as to the reception of my research by the local scene. How was I to communicate that the aim of this research was not to criticize the scene as a theorist stepping in from a position of knowledge but rather to contribute to and to formulate specific proposals? It was through the model of action research that I was enabled to clearly articulate these aims and to further sketch out my working methodology. Action research is a method

used primarily in education, its objective being to address issues in local contexts through a reflective process that is “*by and for* those taking the action”, while also contributing to a larger body of knowledge (Sagor, 2000, p. 8). Thus, this research involved me being an active member of the artistic scene I argued for, and thus part of the structures I was mapping and exploring, aiming to foster better conditions for all, to ameliorate an existing working system and, at the same time, cultivate a sense of identity stemming from the scene rather than an external authority or an overall theoretical paradigm. Specifically, one of my key intentions for this research was to model methods of working-with and writing-with one another, taking responsibility, co-authoring and co-shaping the material that makes up the local contemporary dance culture. Finally, given that the research was motivated by the particular scene, I paid attention so that the theories involved were always grounded in relation to particular practices. That way, theoretical analysis embarked from specific events aiming to outline and examine them rather than practice serving as an example to theoretical analysis. This grounding in artistic practice was also a way of empowering the local scene that considered itself an outsider in relation to central European ones.

However, ethnography is not a strict framework that was blindly employed but rather a flexible and creative method of studying and analyzing the artistic scene in question that incorporates the researcher’s and the artists’ voices. One of the most common mechanisms I used throughout the research to cope with the complexity of situations, to shed light on particular events that then became the stepping stones for examining and pinpointing common cultural practices, established structures and normative or exceptional discourses, is the *anecdote*. According to Jane Gallop (2002), who coined the term “anecdotal theory”, the *anecdote* is a narrative device that illuminates what is trivial and can thus be dismissed in a generalized discussion. The *anecdote* is “an opportunity to knot theory to the here and now”, and thus to produce theory from a specific moment in a specific context as does this research focusing on the local contemporary dance scene working in an ever-changing financial and sociopolitical context (ibid., p. 5). Finally, Gallop (ibid.) points out how the *anecdote* is a way to think through and to bring about difference and diversity through single moments that act as a springboard, as well as a method of examining the singular in order to open up to the general context and to theorise, drawing links that could otherwise go unnoticed.

Similarly, for sociologist Mike Michael (2012), the *anecdote* is a powerful mechanism for narrating, as it facilitates empathy in relating the personal to the social, even though it is at the same time a real event that occurred and a constructed, personal memory. Moreover, he points out how the *anecdote* describes an incident that disrupts the usual order of events, and highlights moments of difference and deviation, exposing what is expected as ordinary. Finally, the *anecdote*, according to Michael (ibid.), makes the author accessible, vulnerable and out in the open, making her own structures visible and accountable, and thus taking a step forward in being posited within the context she is examining, so that her position is fully acknowledged as such.

Looking back, throughout my ethnographic research, one of my greatest difficulties was

to realise how I had embodied certain power relations that I then replicated, when doubting my choices and initial aims, and finding it increasingly difficult to justify my topic and write about it. My marginal position as a member of a dance scene at the periphery of Europe disempowered me as a researcher and minimized, to my own eyes, the value and importance of the particular study. Moreover, the topic of the crisis becoming a theoretical concept while I was living it in my everyday life made it even harder for me to distance myself from contrasting realities that I was part of and to examine them. Time and time again I would stand in front of my desktop screen, unable to write, intimidated, while at the same time my fieldwork notes were plenteous and promising, residues of exciting experiences from which many conclusions could be drawn. In so far as this excitement remained personal, hidden in my private notes, I was satisfied, but once I had to take on my writing persona, I was stuck in limbo. In meeting after meeting, I kept asking myself and my supervisor, "Who cares about that scene?", gradually realizing and being shaken by the fact that marginalization was embedded in me as a hegemonic practice and method of understanding my own contours, and as part of the identity of the local dance scene always described as being unimportant. In other words, my difficulty was not simply an inherent and fairly common part of a writing process, but a way of replicating a vulnerable position embodied as both a Greek on the periphery of Europe and a scholar from a marginal artistic scene. So, in order to write this research study, I had to dislocate myself and the local scene, to be displaced from a disempowered position to a visible one that nonetheless remains fragile, vulnerable, anxious, uncertain and in doubt. In a much more poetic understanding, Odysseas Elytis (1994, p. 29) writes that one has to support one foot out of the earth so as to be able to stand on it, which is exactly what I ended up doing in order to cope with this task, but mostly so as to live up to my own expectations when writing about friends, co-workers and professional acquaintances, exposing my own but also their everyday working lives, as indicative of the local dance scene.

It may, at first sight, seem irrelevant and quite self-indulgent to talk about my personal difficulties in writing and researching. However, it is in itself the most powerful example of how sociopolitical structures affect our modes of working, consciously and unconsciously, our way of thinking, how we relate to one another, and how we identify ourselves and our context, so that in many tiny but significant ways the dominant discourse is being replicated and reaffirmed. In other words, including these difficulties is a method of revealing how they are a symptom of a structure that I, as a researcher, have embodied and enabled. According to Soyini Madison (2011, p. 24), researchers employing ethnography need to be aware that "we bring our belongings into the field with us, not only the many others who constitute our being but how we belong to what we know". Hence, the power of ethnography and anthropology as methodologies is exactly that they witness and record these webs of relations in culture and in society through specific examples that associate the particular with the generic, and the personal with the social, so as to generate criticality along with human empathy.

Literary resources

Besides ethnographic approaches that map, examine and discuss specific artistic practices and everyday incidents, I also drew heavily from theoretical fields such as the artist in neoliberalism and dance scholarship looking at ethnography and the links between the artistic, the political and the social. This allowed me to situate my work within a wider cultural discipline, to relate the particular local scene to other artistic scenes and realities, and to examine my topic through both theory and practice. There is a wide spectrum of choices when studying dance not only as an aesthetic field but as a discipline that represents and co-shapes the sociopolitical context of its time. Focusing on the sociology of the arts, politics and sociopolitical context, I turned to Andrew Hewitt on social choreography (2005), Alexandra Carter on revisiting methodologies of dance history (2004), and an extensive bibliography of scholars who relate specific dance practices to their social and political framework. For example, Sally Banes associates Judson Dance Theater and its practices to the prevailing democratic values of the 1960s, Mark Franko situates modern dance of the 1930s in the USA in relation to labour movements and communist ideology, and Stacey Prickett undertakes specific case studies of contemporary and South Asian dance in both the US and the UK, making links between the two nations and focusing on identity politics and sociocultural issues (Banes, 1987 and 1993; Franko, 2002; Prickett, 2013).

What is more, however, in terms of unpacking the theoretical implications of my ethnographic fieldwork, is that by exploring the associations between the cultural and the political context, this research was also part of a larger ongoing discussion on the role of the artist in a neoliberal context, as expressed by Paolo Virno (2004), Luc Boltanski and Eve Chiapello (2007), Pascal Gielen and Paul De Bruyne (2012), Gabriele Brandstetter and Gabriele Klein (2013), and Bojana Kunst (2015). The main point of this discussion, which was very informative for my understanding and examination of the dance scene in Athens, is that the artist-performer has become the exemplar-working model for neoliberalism, building upon notions of virtuosity, flexibility and mobility; moreover, that the most basic human attribute, that of language, is now at the core of neoliberal production modes, capitalizing on and exploiting affective and cognitive skills such as communication shifting to immaterial labour, linking to contemporary dance and the performing arts.

By engaging with and studying these theories, while also focusing on the local dance scene, I realized that this case study could inform the larger debate on the role of the arts within a neoliberal context, particularly at times of crisis. More specifically, my research looks into a turbulent period when the role of the arts is being debated, and when societal and political structures are being dismantled, creating an unpredictable framework that has to be examined closely. It looks at the contemporary, in that it examines artistic practices while they were occurring in a shifting context, which, in turn, poses important methodological issues that are examined in this article. Thus, it is not only linked to other work in the fields of performance and dance studies, but also contributes to on-going debates on artistic practices within a context of crisis, by exploring them in actual time.

Catching up with time

Besides the anxieties regarding the validity of the research and the significance of the local dance scene, along with such ethical issues as which part of the scene to examine and why – which were addressed in the early stages of the work through ethnographic methodologies – other questions troubled me, all related to the notion of time. How can a study reflect and embody a constantly shifting sociopolitical reality labeled as crisis when it is always one step back from what is happening? I have to admit that it can only do so in bits and pieces, echoing the fragmentary nature of contemporaneity as one where there is “no continuity of time at all anymore” (Lorey in Puar, 2012, p. 173). Specific time frames, as well as specific political, social and artistic events were used as landmarks to navigate through this landscape, and to provide the necessary structure for examining, associating with and reflecting on the chosen topics. At some points during the research, significant events for exploring and understanding the local dance scene propelled me to re-organise my material and rewrite chapters so as to include them, which is mentioned here as a specific working methodology for observing and exploring contemporary topics. The researcher needs to be aware of the sometimes sheer speed and unpredictability of social and cultural restructuring that takes place when studying the present time, to acknowledge it in her writing and to take into account that the research will possibly be incomplete in some parts and ongoing even after the final writing.

To deal with this timeliness of my project, the dramatization of the crisis occurring in the public sphere, and the intertwining of theory and artistic practice, I turned to *Cruel Optimism* by Lauren Berlant (2011). I was captivated by her approach to crisis as ordinary, and precarity as an affective and structural condition of neoliberalism (ibid.). The work of Berlant was chosen to frame my methodological approach because it focuses on everyday experiences, tracking those fantasies that make up the good life, and exposing how they operate amidst a normalised crisis that disrupts them repeatedly. She argues for the significance of the present moment as a “historical sensorium”, one that can be very powerful and meaningful in revealing how things operate (ibid., p. 3). Specifically, Berlant (ibid., p. 4) argues that “the historical sense with which *Cruel Optimism* is most concerned involves conceiving of a contemporary moment from within that moment”, and it is exactly this methodology that I chose to apply while writing about the local contemporary dance scene amidst conditions of precarity and crisis. In this methodological approach, the present is “a temporal genre whose conventions emerge from the personal and public filtering of the situations and events that are happening in an extended manner now, whose very parameters are also always there for debate”, so that every single moment can be reviewed, examined and discussed in a shifting context (ibid.).

Afterthoughts

Even though my motivation for this research has been my personal implication with and knowledge of the particular scene, those were also my most important challenges as they raise ethical issues

that need to be addressed the soonest possible. One of my very first decisions when embarking on the research was to work with an ethnographic methodology so as to first acknowledge my positionality; second, to be able to imbue the research with my personal knowledge; third, to incorporate the artists' voices in the study; fourth, to map and explore a wide range of working relations; and, fifth, to be able to observe and map the necessary working practices. Moreover, I used *anecdotes*, as a methodology that takes the personal as a starting point to examine the collective and also serves as a starting point for further theoretical explorations. Besides, early on I decided that the aim of the research was to contribute to, not criticize, the scene in question, choosing the action research methodology as complementary to ethnography. This way, from the very beginning it was evident that the purpose was to map an unruly scene and when possible to articulate proposals that would be beneficial for that part of the local scene, always pinpointing that I was part of that proposal. That is, by positing myself as part of both the current situation and its possible alternatives. Additionally, I was focusing on the local, the specific, but aiming to relate it to wider cultural realities in central Europe, thus making the links between specific and generic. By the same token, my working methodology as discussed in this article was to ground theoretical exploration in particular incidents, hence making a concrete choice that the starting point of the research would always be the local scene, in order to empower it and to better study it. Finally, keeping in mind that this research was looking at the present, I based my methodological framework on Lauren Berlant arguing for the present as a "historical sensorium" (ibid., p. 3). This means one has to be aware of present circumstances, registering the shifts occurring, being alert to her own bias in choosing events and acknowledging the partiality of the research in relation to its timeliness.

In conclusion, ethnographic methodology has been used to generate critical insights into the local dance culture, granting me access to several events, performances, rehearsals, informal gatherings and other activities, and bridging the voices of the theorist and the artist. At the same time though, my personal perspective is proof of my own bias towards selected material and therefore inevitably involves a limitation as to my understanding and exploration of the scene, since being a native means I am both an actor in and product of local circumstances. According to Susan Foster (2013), theory is a result of participatory processes involving both the researcher and the researched. She argues (ibid. p. 23)

As part of that participatory process, theory generally emphasizes the partial knowledge that is produced by any body's journey and the multiple forms of knowledge that can be apprehended through different modes of sense perception.

In other words, the participatory processes are part of knowledge making, even if they are partial to some extent. What I have learnt out of the process and the specific methodology is that as a researcher looking at the local scene, it is easy to replicate standing hierarchies of knowledge that prioritise theory against practice, and define dance as an art form that is invisible

and disempowered, even though the aim of writing has been to challenge these preconceptions. Through the methodological frameworks I have been discussing in this article, I became more aware of these hierarchies and therefore more reflective and critical with regard to my own context, acknowledging and engaging critically with structures but also recognizing my own boundaries. Thus, this research on the contemporary dance scene in Athens would have been impossible without a methodological framework that combines a variety of tools in order to take into account the needs but also the difficulties of researching under one's own roof.

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