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ARTICLE

Making something together: A conversation about creating and sharing dance knowledge

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Abstract

In this transcript of an extended interview, Dame Siobhan Davies discusses her biography and oeuvre in the context of an enquiry into aspects of learning, transmission, and claims to ownership over the material that makes modern dance. The creative practice of contemporary dance makers offers an opportunity to describe the "coming into being" of both knowledge and persons in a unique domain, but one also connected to other areas of the arts and collaborative practice. Davies describes an approach to making dance that explicitly rejects two key notions: that the body merely performs what the mind creates and, thus, that the choreographer and the dancer are in a hierarchical relationship of control mirroring the control of mind over matter. She then describes how her creative processes with others have been increasingly shaped to allow non-proprietorial and non-hierarchical outcomes that are substantive to the art works themselves.

Introduction

In this article, London-based dance maker Siobhan Davies discusses her biography and oeuvre in a conversation with James Leach, a social anthropologist interested by authorship, knowledge sharing, and claims to ownership in contemporary dance.[1] Dame Siobhan Davies has been making dance work for 50 years and, for much of that time, has directed Siobhan Davies Dance (SDD), an organization and venue dedicated to supporting and promoting independent dance artists. At the heart of the work at SDD is a conviction that independent contemporary dance offers a unique exploration of human existence and generates significant works of art. This interview turns to the possibility of learning specifically about transmission and ownership in this context and how these aspects both reflect, and challenge, conventions.

Leach has previously worked on arts, ownership, and knowledge exchange in contexts as far apart as Indigenous Papua New Guinea, UK government-funded art and science collaborations, and contemporary dance itself. Our interview was agreed upon as an opportunity for a non-specialist in dance scholarship (Leach) to interrogate the ownership aspects of Davies's approach in her work. This was undertaken as part of a research project to which

[1] For working definitions of contemporary dance, see Cjeviç 2015; Sarah Whatley, "Embodied Cultural Property: Contemporary and Traditional Dance Practices," in this issue.

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Davies lent her support, which examined the transmission and sharing of knowledge in the creative processes of contemporary dance.[2]

The text is an edited version of a conversation recorded in March 2018. The editing of the transcript has been minimal. The conversation is framed with this short introduction situating the mutual interests of the two authors in exploring ownership and attribution. The wider engagement, of which this was a part, came about in the context of developing a collaborative research agenda into the creation, transmission, and sharing of dance knowledge and appropriate ways of approaching the "ownership" of such knowledge. In this project, we saw a value in starting with what we might learn from contemporary dance practice about the principles and assumptions about responsibility, reciprocation, and value that lie behind these embodied forms of contemporary collaborative creativity.

By examining the creative processes of contemporary dance, we hope that there is the potential to describe making that lies between people, and between bodies, in a clearly ritualized and separate space (the studio). Leach and colleagues were already working on projects

> to make visible the creative aspect of relations between persons, in this case, dancers working to improvise material in a studio setting. The social as it appears [in the work of improvisation and creation] was shown to be more than an agglomeration of individual inputs. It is an emergent aspect of relations between persons, and figures centrally in what and how those persons can body forth their selves, personalities, and capacities. Creativity "resides" as much in the process of interrelation as it does in the individual as a part of the process.[3]

Following on from these findings, the project of which Davies was a part looked at issues around ownership, and the conventional focus of property rights on individuals, which seemed pertinent to investigate further.

The interview records a tentative meeting of minds from different disciplines toward speculative results about how dance could offer new models for ownership of shared and collaboratively produced knowledge. What is not speculative, however, is the articulation of the commitments and principles of one particular, solo practitioner, who has had her own dance company in London for decades and who has status in the field. Davies speaks as a practitioner in the interview, one who is committed to finding the right words to describe dance practice, as her own comments in the interview about language reveal. The many issues that she brings forward (gender, authority, mind and body continuity, responsibility) are aspects of the discussion of ownership for her. This situates the interview within the context of this special issue.

We begin from the idea that the creative practice of contemporary dance artists offers an opportunity to describe the coming into being of both knowledge and persons in a unique domain, but one also connected to other areas of the arts and to collaborative practice in contemporary European society. As dance making utilizes the body/bodies to undertake its "thinking" – its exploration of concepts, feelings, space, and time – we assume that much of the knowledge sharing and transmission in the dance studio is happening through non-verbal means.[4] We also assume that, for this to be possible, more or less implicit norms of behavior, recognition, reciprocation, and communication must be present. It is the latter

[2] "Dance, Digitisation, Ownership," funded by the Centre for Science and Innovation, University of California, Davis, 2018–20.

[3] Leach and Stevens 2020, 112.

[4] DeLahunta 2013.

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that we hope to unveil to some extent during the conversation as well as Davies's motives for working in the way that she does with reference to ownership.

Our interview discussed making and learning, institutional patterns and expectations of leadership, and how those are colored by culturally pervasive assumptions about creativity —specifically, assumptions about how mind or intellect forms matter. Davies considers that the practice of dance making in itself opens up possibilities for seeing these things in a different light. This is linked, in her thinking, to ownership and to significant gendered dimensions to conventional patterns of leadership. Locating the arts practice firmly in its context in this manner reveals how economic pressures often lead toward the work of "individual creators" and "individual minds," turning dancers and their bodies into "receivers" of forms generated outside or beyond them.

This has clear implications for ownership, which Davies wishes to challenge from first principles, as it were, by adapting her making process itself to work with the body and mind as a whole and to avoid institutionalizing one mind/person as creator. In this pursuit, it is possible to see her situated within a wider movement in the domain of contemporary dance.[5] She is explicit about her position as a well-known artist and about the advantages and responsibilities that this position implies. The theme of ownership runs through the interview and is central, as it is where and how the work undertaken at Siobhan Davies Dance by Davies and her collaborators practiced an alternative to conventional hierarchies and modes of making work.

Davies discusses some challenges of working collaboratively outside the frame of mind/body distinction, ranging from conceptual/tropic (how to conceive of the whole person and not the mind/body) to the different time frames and vulnerabilities that it can throw up for those involved. This leads the interview to consider how and what is made "between people" as exploratory work is undertaken in the studio. The final section reveals some of the unspoken elements of the creative work at Siobhan Davies Dance Studio in which there are expectations of different but mutual benefits from working together. It also alludes to how these are also shaped by the context in which the organization is situated, and her active desire to work differently in that context.

We began our interview with a question about Davies's creative process and the role of other people in generating and creating ideas/dance material.

The Interview

JL: In your most recent work, *Materials Rearranged To Be* (*MRTB*) (2017),[6] you deliberately invited other artists to be co-creators of the work, and you also have explicitly given them license to use their material from this work in subsequent projects that do not involve you/SDD. You have also said that your career to date has been building toward this kind of experiment in collaboration.

Does your approach in *MRTB* point to a uniquely collaborative ethos in contemporary dance?

SD: Those of us working on *MRTB* wanted to take the opportunity to reveal what we work with and how, which is that dance has a genuine collaborative nature embedded in its behaviors. SDD facilitates a group of dance-based artists naturally drawn to this investigative mode. I believe that historically dance has always been made with dancers contributing their knowledge into a choreography, but in the hierarchy of dance companies and how that

[5] Laemans 2015, 18.
[6] See Davies 2017.

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is perceived by others, the choreographer can be seen to be the mind and the dancer the body.

It is the old adage of having two words describing something that dance delivers as one. My thinking is that those at work in SDD – dancers, choreographers, performers (they could be all three of those at the same time) – are trying to investigate movement free from particular techniques that have in the past been devised to support other choreographers or other dancers. The body does have anatomical restrictions, but our culture, education, health, position, economy all give the expression of our whole selves the potential of beautiful difference. I think that is what I am witnessing, the expansive exploration of our affinities and differences and the desire to communicate generously.

Some of the artists who I am conscious of now or maybe I have worked with begin with a concept, a particular investigation they hone in on and want to work with, and, using their movement practice, they shape and articulate what they wish to share with an audience. Others have a practice of movement and use it as a form of archaeology, trusting that they will unearth a concept through those means.

The movements might initially appear as un-imaginable or unorthodox, but they are human movement derived through close attention to how the body – they ARE (that is, in their being) – gives them feedback. The body that has felt knowledge, felt experiences embedded within it … if and when we decide to notice them.

I can call this a "whole" practice, but this is where my language goes awry [laughs] to me these practices become evidence of how we exist beyond mind-body functions. Everything comes into play: thought, feeling, senses, imagination, and felt knowledge. We enter a studio, and, to begin with, we may not know the outcome of our investigation, and each and every one of us will bring into that room what is important to them and then apply what they know in the presence of other people doing much the same thing. We are equally vulnerable and demonstrative. Over time, through a series of conversations, engagements, questions, doing and undoing, critical companionship, something arises – the work arises out of the complexity and multiplicity.

I remember studying dance as a young woman and learning a particular technique. I had agreed to the hierarchy between myself and the teacher. She knew far more than I did, and I wanted to absorb information from her. I remember the sensation of being soft wax within her gaze. Later on, this could have hardened and become difficult to alter the perspective of being the receiver of commands rather than the generator of investigation. These nascent relationships can continue within a dancer's life and, in some cases, are encouraged.

Of course, there are many wonderful dancers who have adhered to particular techniques and use those methodologies to become extraordinary artists in both named techniques and their expression of them. My perspective is that each and every one of us involved in dance can bring the whole of themselves to their experience and meet the experience of whoever else they are working with – whatever stage they have reached. I am trying to understand how a possible remolding of working relationships can happen because it is dancing itself that is the teacher. I have observed classes in which the interplay between students and teacher is built on exchanges of information, conversations, and the development of more nuanced and better understood movement.

JL: I find it easier to relate to the first part of what you say – the critique of the standard (is it standard?) way of thinking about how choreography is made. And your descriptive language there resonates with a lot of what we know and think about the way the creative mind works – that is, what, as contemporary Europeans, we assume about creativity – that it is the imposition of form on matter or spirit shaping material and that bodies become a kind of

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material for the choreographer to use.[7] I have worked with choreographers who say that their dancers' bodies are the material they work with. In the context of our conversation, I am interested in your divergence from this model.

SD: Yes I think that is the divergence, however much I enjoy the work of many choreographers who work differently. What I am curious about is what happens if we take sustained leadership away – where leadership might alternatively rise and fall from any one of the individuals involved – where we recognize the strengths of each of us, and, when our weakness or a lack of knowledge or energy is not present, someone else can take the wave on.

I am curious about this because, from a more political point of view, I am concerned to understand better what are the best situations for humans to make decisions in. Recently, there has been so much talk about leadership roles particularly in relationship to women: "Women need to recognize their leadership qualities and the rest of the world need to do that as well." And my curiosity is that maybe the female in any one of us might approach this statement differently or could approach the word leadership differently.

JL: It is fascinating to have this concern with politics, and gender politics, there within the work. In recent times, there has been a strong emphasis on rebalancing power relations – specifically, where gender is concerned. How do you view your role here?

SD: I am trying to say the female in us because I think plenty of men have this within them as well and would therefore recognize a slight shift in leadership patterns. So you said the first half was obvious, but the second half the mind-body thing? It is so bloody difficult to articulate, but I would love to do it better because I have a feeling it is becoming increasingly relevant.

JL: It is not surprising that it is harder to grasp conceptually because it is exactly the alternative (you are exploring through movement) that is interesting. I could grasp the critique (although it was not a direct critique of any particular artist's practice) but find it more difficult to grasp an alternative – whether that is in dance or in other genres where it is all about the formation of the material through a top-down imposition. You are suggesting here something like: "It is a conscious choice to shape human beings' relations to one another. Yes, we can make each other into the material for others' manipulation but, to do so, has to be a conscious choice."

SD: YES!

JL: And that this choice has certain kinds of outcome not just in terms of how the artwork is made but also in terms of how the making process feeds into certain institutions and institutional expectations? And the way in which these institutional expectations reassert

[7] To elaborate drawing upon feminist scholarship, Carol Delaney (1986) highlighted that transcendentalist conceptions of creativity (and creation) are aspects of a Judeo-Christian heritage, linking this to the gender implications of a modernist version of creation. She points out that Adam was the genitor of the line of human beings who, partaking in God's divine creativity, were able to recreate themselves. Culture, agriculture, objectification – all those elements in our history and society that impose form upon the world – are versions of the primordial creativity that Adam embodied – of man planting his seed in the receptive earth and knowing himself through his own reflection in the response. Delaney argues that it is this idea of "paternity" that is a core symbol around which politics is organized. She describes how it also has a strong influence on ownership since it was God's earth (he created it) that was given to Adam, who then passed it down the male line to his descendants. Paternity in this construction is an act of adding life or spirit to inert but receptive matter. She locates this as a Judeo-Christian political legacy, a hierarchical, "transcendentalist" cosmology where life is outside and inscribed in matter.

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and naturalize assumptions about human nature and human creativity that are at least questionable?

SD: Yes, or at least we understand these variations better and how such alternatives are submerged by centuries of institutional practice. In authorship or leadership, we have patterns of behavior where we feel drawn to the concept of an extraordinary artist or politician – the auteur – and, of course, I too have felt drawn to that shard of brilliance that comes with one particular person. I love it in sports. But there is also brilliance in how we can and need to function as a group or in a community and maybe we have to find a better language to express that.

JL: I wonder if we would do well at this point to return to how you try and instantiate these investigations in the work in the studio. You are revealing where the practice is coming from, but if we return to the ground of your practice, how do you try and instantiate these difficult and challenging ideas in how you work in the studio?

SD: Specifics could be quite good. Something to bear in mind is that I have been in work for 50 years. The first work I made was in 1970 or 1971, and I had been dancing since 1967. Recently I've been trying to reacquaint myself with how I began having spent years not thinking about it at all. I remember so clearly being asked to choreograph by Robert Cohan, the director of London Contemporary Dance Theatre (LCDT). I could barely dance, and I knew nothing about choreography.

The company had only just begun, and Cohan's idea was that each dancer should learn how they could dance better for a choreographer if they learned to choreograph themselves. The technique we were taught was Martha Graham's, and these were the only movements I knew. My early thinking was that I must try and go further than classwork and develop some kind of movement language. I looked at the movement of sports men and women and tried to learn from those disciplines in order to have something else to think about and draw upon.

I entered the studio, and the dancers there knew far more than I did. I was a mixture – proud enough to want to make something and very aware that I needed the support of everybody else in the studio. We developed a learning exchange between those people who were going to perform the work and myself. The feedback loop between us was constantly moving to and fro. Thoughts, movements, questions, solutions became a blur between us as decisions became a constant evolution of movement phrases. I was beginning to work out that I could be an outside initiator with ideas that needed to be fully understood and challenged by the dancers. There was no point making something that didn't interest or stretch all of us.

To begin with, there was time to be investigative, but as the LCDT became a more well-known institution, time was at a premium, and rehearsals became shorter and shorter. Performances were also dictated by audience and critics expectations. That was the first third of my working life.

JL: Was yours a dissatisfaction with the art work or with the process by which it was made?

SD: Dissatisfaction with the process, which of course had an influence on what came out of it. There is a tradition to this day where dance work gets made in a very short space of time because it is expensive to make work if you are going to pay for your artists and the place you are rehearsing in. So the economic consideration, of course, does harm the physical and impact on artistic investigations. I think that is maybe one of the reasons why more conceptual works have evolved.

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Because thinking, planning, researching can be a sole activity and that preparation can then be taken into the studio to become a group activity. Which leads to the single choreographer directing research and becoming the lead thinker and those in the studio having to quickly encompass their thoughts in a brief economically constrained period, which turns them into receivers, and they could be treated or think of themselves as secondary. When it is time and economics that have in fact shaped this pattern of behaviors and the future of dance.

It was why between 1980 and 2018 I have tried to maintain longer rehearsal periods and grow deeper and deeper into trying to ensure that each artist feels authorship over what they are performing. Eventually, this led to *MRTB* being made in 2017, in which each of the nine artists owns their own contribution and can take their contribution away from the main structure and deal with it as they wish.

JL: Thank you, that really does contextualize *MRTB* in a very clear and concise manner.

SD: There is a work I wouldn't mind discussing in this context.

[At this point, SD shows a short film interview of herself in conversation with her company manager Lauren Wright about what collaboration is. It reiterates much of what has been recorded above. Our interview then focuses on part of a dance work called *Rotor* (2010)].[8]

SD: I wanted to give you an image of this piece because I wrote something about it anticipating our conversation today. *Rotor* to me is the work that challenged us the most, as [during the process] distinct individual habits were being reformed with their permission because each dancer was having to negotiate the habits of everybody else. Here is the text that I wrote this morning: [We agree that it can be slotted into our interview text].

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A Series of Appointments in a Work called *Rotor* (2010).
Collaboration

A series of appointments began as a very simple walk for four people in a Russian doll of circles. It was fascinating to see how the character of the individual artists and the repetition of the speed of their particular circumference did not always suit their natures. This gave me the first nudge into what the simple beginning could evolve into.

The five of us collaboratively developing material out of these simple turning circles.

The maintenance of the radius however simple that looks … was a challenge, and when I and the performers wanted to find more potential in the repeated circling … we chose movement paths which followed the loops and twists of a rope as it is formed into a series of tied knots. As each artist followed the direction of the rope they would cross the different speed zones, ranging from fast at the outside edge and slow at the center, and they would need to alter their speed to the zone they were in … however briefly.

[8] "Siobhan Davies Dance," https://archive.siobhandavies.com/work/component/series-appointments/ (accessed 11 April 2022). A film of the performance of *Rotor* can be viewed at "Rotor: A Series of Appointments," 2013, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=132UJTJK-IM (accessed 4 November 2022). See also Davies discussing the work *Rotor*. "Siobhan Davies Dance Rotor," 2011, https://vimeo.com/18410166 (accessed 11 April 2022).

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Charlie, Andrea, Annie, and Lindsey had very different understandings about how to solve the making of a structure shared by four people. And very different ways of communicating what they understood.

They all had a particular way of orientating themselves – Andrea seemed to need to orientate herself to the people near to her, Annie more to where she was in the room, Charlie to where he was on the knot, Lindsey incorporating everything. I was on the outside seeing it all but had no knowledge of the inside workings.

Each used their own sensibilities to communicate to the others who initially could not understand anything but their own. We were coming across the otherness in all of us.

Our differences were as important to how the work developed ... as were our negotiations to be in the right place at the right time.

By the time we were performing the work we felt as if we had not only made a work but gone through a very intricate collaborative process. We had learned a great deal about the differences in our habits, the ones we are not conscious of, and how these unconscious behaviors impact on our companions.

Discovering the otherness in everybody else and how you handle that. When roles are more clearly defined, when you come across somebody's otherness you are likely to decide you don't need that or want that – you want the bit you know and not the bit you don't.

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SD: *Rotor* was the work in which four people had to spatially and temporally work together. They never left each other's sides. But they had agreed on a series of patterns that they had to accomplish one after another, which meant they were in constant negotiation with one another, and no moment was ever truly repeatable. I think this particular work dug really deep into how you put yourself into a situation in which you have to know about what everyone else wants to achieve as well as you. If you don't, you can find yourselves in a totally alien place. The coordinates were arriving and dissolving so rapidly – and they were only provided by the immediately previous or present encounter.

Over 50 years of working, I have changed then, and thank God I have changed. It is choreography that has taught me to do so. Which makes works like *A Series of Appointments* (2010), *Table of Contents* (2013), and *MRTB* (2017) valuable to me because I feel they have used the compost of my earlier work, which has created their nutrients.

JL: How possible or successful is it to allow artists to bring their own work and to take it away with them again? Underlying this is the question we have been discussing – the economic impetus to shorten creation. There is also a question here about who the choreographer is, if they are not directing the movements of others and taking authorship of the result?

SD: There can be a difference between being in control or having and sharing responsibilities for a particular work. The more investment all the artists have in the evolution of a work, the more they know what to do and why.

Dancer/performers are far more praised now for their contributions to the making and performing of work than they were in the past. However, every dancer's body is structurally very differently, and their lived experiences are also different. They can be asked to do movement constructed by someone else who has an unconscious bias toward their own physicality and experiences, and this can be very challenging and eventually unrewarding to

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the one being asked to move in a particular way. Which is again why the wholeness of each contributor can and should be a more valued part of the making.

JL: I would like to know how possible it is to successfully allow a group of different artists to bring their own ideas and work, make something collaborative with it, and then remove the outcomes or movement phrases again to add to new solo work? Can you talk about *MRTB* and how challenging and how successful that experiment was?

SD: The very first days of any gathering of artists to support the making of the new work can set the tone of the whole experience. With *MRTB*, I wanted to find a way in which we all arrived as givers as well as receivers.

I began asking the artists to come together and each one to invite somebody from any discipline who they wanted to introduce us to to be in conversation with them. I was trying to find a relaxed way in which equally we could be made more aware of our present individual curiosities and what was important to us right now. Over a few days, there were plenty of fascinating conversations and demonstrations to share.

The Barbican, at much the same time, asked us to be part of an investigative exhibition that meant the process I just described, instead of being in the privacy of our studio was open to the public. By the end of that week, we had chosen two principal trigger thoughts that would be the holding stones of the eventual work, and the work would be nine artists, including me, to be commissioned and to develop their own work. The holding stones were:

- Feeling of what it is like to be in action, not to see it – the feeling of it.
- The Warburg collection a constellation of images across centuries and cultures, many of them figurative and in gesture.

We had all agreed that these were going to be our foci, and the next step would be to go our own ways and, over a couple of months, write up a proposal of what we might bring to the next meeting. We listened to each other's thoughts and questioned and supported each other. We went away again, and this reiterated throughout the making period, which was nearly a year.

The positive side of this is how very differently each person had a relationship with either or both of these foci. There was genuine delight when we perceived somebody else's perspective, and testing these perspectives to make sure they were in the same family of ideas. If we didn't have a whole family of ideas, then the coherence of the whole made up of many different parts would be harder for the audience to appreciate as they walked through the gallery. The tensions of being a distinct artist but held with in a pre-chosen plan were useful.

The difficulties were mostly to do with timing. We found that the long process meant that we experienced both the many rises and falls of confidence in our ideas over the year of preparation. Two of the visual artists – Jeremy and Emma – conceived of their ideas very early on because their works had to be physically planned and manufactured. These became unalterable even though they were impacted on by being in relationship to all the live work. They then had to watch us struggle to make our work not only have clarity but also be capable of change and growth during the performances.

Charlie and Matthias had developed a concept early on, and they then had to physically drive that deeper into a better performative structure. While Andrea, on her own, and I, in partnership with Helka, took the longest to work through the generative sources we had chosen. It took many attempts to find the form that held the impulses we had begun with. Glithero, the design duo, who had other work commitments to attend to first, were the last

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to devise the extraordinary chalk path that linked the works together and therefore caused an important reassessment in the relationships we had between each other.

Throughout, we needed to adjust to how and when other works were evolving and finalizing. Finally, there had been a choice to involve screens and projectors, but the making of the screens and affordability of projectors came late in the day. The individual artists, at whatever stage of making they were at, needed to come together and choreograph the movements of the screens to keep the changing relationships between the works active.

Everybody was at a different stage of the process at different times. It was hard to maintain the identity of the whole while different parts of it were not in place. Overall, there was real care and consideration, but, in the small particulars, there were collisions, disquiets, bad timing, misunderstandings, as there should be when individuals are taking risks.

We were very conscious of each other's works and the shifting vitality of the relationships between them (because one work might be seen in the presence of first one work and, later on, another during the six-hour performance). To begin with, I am not sure we understood the need for some fluidity at the edges of our works. We knew that the audience would want to make connections between the works they experienced in the different iterations that occurred. Their finding of connections helped us understand some of the softer borders required between each of the works.

But I am thoughtful that if any of the artists want to take their work away from the construct of *MRTB* they might need to recreate it as a solo work with more definition at its edges than would have been right when part of *MRTB.*

JL: Given what we said earlier about using others bodies as the material to realize a choreographer's ideas, what is meant by "material" in this context of *MRTB*?

SD: The word "material" comes loaded with different understandings. I sense that each artist can use the word material in the context of their bodies but also the material of their thinking and their art making. Maybe whatever is the stuff of us! Certainly, the Mnemosyne atlases constructed by Abi Warburg were important materials for us to respond to. He had collected thousands of printed images of works created by different artists from different eras using a range of materials. He chose some of them to pin on huge Hessian boards and then altered their positions searching for the shifting affinities and differences between them. He called these structures constellations of images and ideas, and it gave him a map to identify consistent threads in gesture being portrayed by artists over centuries. You can see how *MRTB* grew out of these atlases.

JL: I wondered if there was some kind of notion of thinking of material differently from the idea that the body is the material.

SD: So material in the sense that Warburg arranged materials together. One of the phrases that the dance-based people used to the visual art people [in making *MRTB*] was that we are always in a process of becoming – we are not in a fixed state. The visual artists wanted to explain to us that they also thought their works were also in a state of becoming.

JL: I'm interested in how you think about other bodies or other people in the studio. What are they for a dance maker of your genre, your practice? And what is a dance maker or choreographer for them?

SD: Our bodies are beautifully put together using many different materials – I think of the bones, skin, muscles, tissues, skin, cells, organs, nerves. I can go on and on, and somehow all

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of these are the body I am, and, however infinitesimally, each helps me to be in and of the world and move and create dance. Why should I separate the dancer out as materials any more than I should separate out anyone walking down the street. And also not separate us from how Warburg arranged his materials, often printed papers of figures in movement. He might not have used the term, but his work is very choreographic.

The word "materials" also gives me a sense of movement. The conversations between the dance artists and the other makers often included talking about the practice of making a dance as a constant process of becoming and never arriving at a fixed state. The other makers agreed that it was the same for them because ideas and connections to a work were always evolving. I still think there are differences – when a dancer performs we are the work and can't walk away from it, leaving something behind. But we understood that the visual artists also did not describe their work as a finished object. They had been conceived and made through movement and created movement responses in those that saw them. The stillness is one frame in a series of movements.

MRTB became the story of so many people and ideas, which means that an audience walking through it is inevitably going to feel connected to some events or parts more than others, but if they stay for long enough, they begin to build up a recognition in the pattern of thoughts that all the artists had addressed because of the common topics.

JL: That is interesting – to find a way to recognize the role of the dancer?

SD: I was a young woman when I began to dance, and it was the dancing itself that caught my imagination. Very soon, I was intrigued to find out what choreography meant and what it could do. I belonged to a tradition that I perceived separated out dance from choreography. Certainly, the messaging around them created two different forms and two different kinds of artists.

My initial choreography needed every generous skill that the dancers I was working with could give me. From that moment on, I truly knew that to make a dance was a collaborative, negotiated, and committed effort for all involved. But, at the end of the day, I was still called the choreographer, and they were called the dancers, and it took me awhile to disentangle myself from this historical structure. I do understand that there are others who prefer to work within this tried and tested definition, but, in my case, it simply wasn't truthful. Yes, in my early works, my ability was to imagine how a work might progress from conception to performance, but everyone involved were the body/mind even if some specifics were done by one and not another. The dancer is as much everything to the work as anyone else.

JL: I am reminded of anthropological work on Melanesia, where we get a sense that, for people there, things, including persons, are emergent from social processes and are directly connected to others through those processes. They are part of each other in a very physical sense. An idea of the generativity of relationship itself is central. People there, I would go so far as to say, covert relationships rather than things. Things and value arise in relationship, and, in that part of the world, it is clear that creative becoming and the necessary connections that it embodies are what is focused upon.[9]

I wonder if this formulation gives us a way of conceiving, from an obviously very different history, practice, and context, something about the reliance of persons as artists on one another in making themselves the artists they are?

SD: Oh yes … in *MRTB*, everyone's work became altered in recognition of what other artists had brought into the room. And also each individual work had to grow in its own robustness

[9] See, for example, Strathern 1988; Leach 2003.

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and hold its own qualities within the whole production. Dancing is more like living a life than I had initially appreciated.

It is an art that concentrates on the relationships we have going on within every part of our whole body, with the spaces and people we share time with, and in recognition that everything lives in movement and change. We are social beasts and want to feel connected, and making real connections, not forced ones, demands constant noticing. In *MRTB*, we thought of ourselves as good companions to each other ... supportive but not compliant.

JL: I have a question directly about leadership, responsibility, and the institutional structures in which you are embedded?

SD: I have real desires about what I am aiming for, but, of course, a lot of the time I don't achieve what I'm aiming for. I need to be truthful, but while I am trying to provide a space for everyone to contribute, I am at this point the one who provides the money and situation for this to happen. I have an Arts Council grant, I have a building, and I can't deny that I have a substantial position that draws people toward me and gives me responsibilities, many of which I enjoy.

There were times during *MRTB* when I felt conflicted. Outside the studio, I knew I needed to be aware of all the things beyond the making of the work. Inside the studio, I wanted to be one of the group making decisions but I had to recognize that I had other responsibilities and would be called upon to solve a situation. There were moments when I felt split. But, looking back, the dilemmas were worked through, and by more people than just me – although I wanted and needed to be very conscious of what was happening and be aware of who it was happening to.

I noticed that each of us have days in which we feel free and very able to present ideas and be in conversation and take a lead, and, on other days, those same people are in a more reflective mode and somebody else has the energy. Allowing for – in fact, actively encouraging – this ebb and flow of energy and ideas can help bring more overall equality. But we still need to notice that some are rich and fast with ideas and some value a slower approach and need to be given time and space to do something in the way they need.

We are not imagining that we are equal in all ways and at all times. The point is to release the artists into the best of their own investigative and research energy where they are not restricted by other people. They can be encouraged by the presence of other works and the complexities that run through everything without that necessarily becoming a distraction.

JL: Could I get you to talk about the more difficult aspect? You say people are drawn to you because of your position. The inevitable tension between you wanting to be inclusive but in the end you are responsible for a product?

SD: There are terrains within terrains that we try to deal with. In the studio, a sort of engine room for making, there can be particular sensibilities at work. The further you go to the other "rooms" in the house of making, those rooms have particular needs – to be financially responsible is one area, to create partnerships, to market the work and make sure audiences see it, and to assess the work once it has been performed. The assessments need to be done by people other than ourselves, although we do give each other constant feedback and try and look at the whole work from a greater distance than our own close perspective. We get feedback from the audiences and from the venues and try to generate a 360-degree understanding of what has been made and done.

JL: How do you cope with the fact that audiences do expect to see Siobhan Davies.

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SD: I have had a long history of performing in theatres and certainly then people expected to see the work of Siobhan Davies. The theatre uses traditional formats with titles such as writers, directors, and choreographers. It wasn't until I left the theatre that I was able to begin disentangling those traditions. It took a while because expectations from everyone needed to be adjusted.

And I am not saying that I was either quick or as thorough as I would now like to have been. The audiences who had followed my work in theatres found it hard to stay with my new work in galleries. I was touched by the fact they felt they could not make the move with me. But I have gained new audiences with different perspectives and questions. An ever-evolving ethic of practice is the route I have taken, and I believe I can see the natural growth from the first work to the last in how I have developed as an artist.

JL: The artists you work with have a responsibility to work hard, to do things for you, that are in some way, well, they have a responsibility to do their best? How would you phrase their responsibilities?

SD: It is tough being a dancer, and the reward of dancing is how much you learn as a whole being. It is far more than steps or being at the right place at the right time. There is a constant awakening and reawakening to the possibility of what dance is and does. I think the dancers that I work by the side of take the responsibility of living and demonstrating this theory.

In the work *Table of Contents* (2013), each artist made individual works, and, throughout the six hours of performance, we would gather around a table and meet the audience and be able to engage with them about what they had just seen or experienced. But we had still not made it clear enough because the audience often said that this is a Siobhan Davies work even though we had credited the individuals.

This is why I felt so strongly that in *MRTB* each artist should own their own work, be responsible for it in the future as much as the present if they wished, and that it would be impossible for anyone to see these works as mine. Yes, many of the audience might have come because of my name and reputation, but I think it was very obvious once they entered into the gallery that this was an installation of many artists' works. Each of us had to be very honest about how we might be using each other to better our working lives but that felt very doable. My organization and I wanted to work with the best artists in our field, and these artists wanted and deserved the financial support and the exposure we could give them.

But saying this does not get rid of the many complexities and expectations that occurred during the making and performing of this work. Throughout, we were learning about our roles and how we might evolve better situations for the future.

JL: I am very interested in the way you are revealing a form of reciprocation that is (maybe) unspoken. If people come and work with you, they know their work will be given more prominence. What is unspoken in this way is important to articulate.

SD: Yes, we need to reveal the underbelly. Someone once said that to be a good teacher you need to teach everything you know. I wonder if in our situation what we are trying to do is to be as generous with everything we have to hand. I am not sure how possible that is, but something like it can occur. It is an exchange of what we are or want to be at that moment. Because the dancer and the dance are in constant evolution, my sense is that their generosity can be boundless, which needs reflecting on.

In *MRTB*, the artist realized that the work they made for this situation could be the foundations of something they could make in the future because it was theirs to do with what they wished.

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JL: Is it still a criticism in dance to say that a work is derivative?

SD: If we are the materials in the richest sense of that word, then a lot of us and our learnings are going to turn up in the next and subsequent works. If *MRTB* artists decide to further the work they made for us, I imagine they would alter it, taking into account the different perspective it might be seen in. Effrosini used her choreographic knowledge to create a dance of images, she told me that was the first time she had done that, and we had encouraged her bravery. I am not sure what will come next for her, but maybe she had created a sound and fresh foundation stone for it.

As for SDD, we have asked the artists that, where possible, the work *MRTB* is credited as the initial starting point, which is partly to promote our ethos of supporting the growth and sustainability of works.

JL: You have set up your structure [at SDD] so they are not "your" dancers. Many might say: we pay them, we provide classes, physiotherapy, we offer professional development, and so on.

SD: I don't see it as a sort of tit for tat. Dance is so much about how to work as well as the work it produces. It encourages certain kinds of reciprocal behaviors that are wonderful to be part of and need recognition and encouragement. I like what we are trying to do, and maybe it can be a point of reference or a test bed for others to explore and build on.

To be a single artist in this century is unsustainable, and yet when they choose to work with others, the group or organizational dynamic also brings its problems with old patterns of behavior, including an overly hierarchical structure no longer working. I see dance and dancers as testing some very important and fresh practices that could be informative in many other areas. Dance artists are now being sought out by many other disciplines for what they bring to the table, and what ownership means can be one of those things.

Conclusion/Closing

Our interview has revealed some of the contours of a practice in which several principles and assumptions relevant for this special issue are apparent. Despite the art form's unique possibilities and approach to ownership, it nevertheless is confronted by or also embodies widespread conceptions of the person and correct modes of institutional organization in contemporary UK society. One such conception is that of the individual. This form of the social person is one that seems to need to work on collaboration in consciously specific ways in order to overcome the paramount perception of separate persons working in their own interests. *MRTB* (2017) worked within these parameters while, at the same time, pushing at their boundaries. Davies situates her practice as working against conventions that reinforce hierarchies and mind-body distinctions and makes explicit that doing so is a political decision.

She offers, in her approach to practice, an exercise in rejecting command and control and offering what she describes as a female perspective on leadership, based around an oscillation and sharing of roles. This leads directly to the experiments that she has made in the agreements governing ownership of dance material made at SDD.[10] By attributing ownership of knowledge and material to those she collaborates with, in a formal and reflexive manner, we see both the conventions of individual creativity and ownership being acknowledged, and being innovated upon. Davies also situates herself within a wider

[10] See "Example Contract," n.d, https://uoa33.coventry.domains/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/material_example_contract.pdf (accessed 4 November 2022).

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movement in which there is a conscious and sustained effort on the part of dance makers to address and ethically engage their context. Attention to the very conditions of making – its situatedness within a legal, institutional, as well as social and cultural context – is both material and matters to them.

As Davies put it in relation to the inspiration for her way of approaching collaboration, and drawing directly on how she knows as a dance artist, she concluded our interview with the following observation: "I don't have a body, we are a body. The body is my teacher. This helps diminish ideas of hierarchy, as it isn't one part directing the other because I am one thing, a constellation of communicative interplay, a blueprint for a way of working."

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