

Three Interviews on Documenting Practices

Ulla Mäkinen

While thinking and writing about documenting in education, I also wanted to have practitioners' voice be heard. So I asked three dancers, three questions about their documentation practices. Meet Suvi and Alli, two young dancers who are about to graduate Outokumpu in 2017, and Oiva, a seven-year old Superhero Acrobat.



— Suvi Tuominen (middle) dancing with Mikaela Jokinen and Nina Tiusanen at Oriental Hype Festival in Helsinki, June 2015. The dance is a style called Raqs Al Nashat, which is a women's dance from the Persian Gulf. Photo by Lauri Sario

Suvi Tuominen

27 years old, 2nd year dance student,
Outokumpu, Finland

1. How do you document your experiences in dance?

Mostly, documentation starts already during class. The notes are only keywords in a notebook that later on can lead to more personal conclusions. Documenting a dance class with writing is something else than documenting, for example, a university lecture. This writing includes more subjective viewpoints and also some emotional experiences that rose during the exercises. If the classes are very technical or include a lot of repertory, it might be that I don't write anything down. I just embody the qualities or movement patterns, maybe film them for further observations later on. It's a rather mechanical procedure. But if the class includes, for example, more historical knowledge, movement philosophy or ideas of dance as an art form, I might end up writing several pages that can end up being a long monologue or a dialogue with myself. Mostly, these types of classes lead to several questions that then lead to writing possible answers. But then, yet again, more questions come up. As a conclusion, I could say that my dance documentation somehow ends up mostly being questions... It might be something the teacher said that leads me towards questioning something I have been previously learning or thinking.

2. What is your motivation for documenting? Why do you document?

Dance, especially contemporary dance, is very dynamic and is in constant movement. Documentation helps me also to stay dynamic and continuously question my work. During documentation, especially during writing, my experiences in dance become more concrete and somehow closer to research – as the way we know it in our societies. The writing also helps me to show what things I actually found important to document. In other words, what I decide to write is somehow more meaningful to me than things I leave out. This is in a way also problematic since my personal documentation choices instantly have an effect on the future as well, or the way I might dance in the future.

Then again, the documents that are being made are also preserving the past and you always have them with you. I find it way more important than not to document at all. In such a dynamic field a thing that happened five years ago might already be 'ancient' according to the general viewpoint, and in this case it might be that past documentation becomes very crucial in order to observe the process as a whole. Then again, the human life always goes in circles, and subjects from the past suddenly can become very topical.

I document in order to have something concrete of my work. Dance as an art form leaves no traces or artifacts behind. Documents also show the process and reasons. It gives the movement itself a deeper aspect and another approach or interpretation of what just happened. And the best thing about it is that there is no correct way of documenting dance, so there is the possibility of making choices that serve the purpose of documenting a certain dance matter.

3. What is the future of your documentation: do you return to them? If so, when and how often? Do you wish to publish something? What would be your documentation dream?

I always return to my documents. Especially when I am teaching or I have some questions in my head I return to my notes and see if there are any answers, thoughts or keywords there that might be helpful. I feel that I am kind of constantly publishing my notes in my work as a dancer and as a teacher. All the information that has been given to me and therefore 'double' secured with the documents ends up in my work. The publishing is sharing the knowledge onwards and hoping that someone else will grab it and document it as well.

But in the sense of publishing an article, I sure wish to do so one day. Dance is such a subjective subject that there can't ever be enough publications about it. Even there would be hundreds of people writing about the same subject there would still be some tones or viewpoints that differ. Now that I am writing my Master's Degree about pre-historical dance and also need to use material from the historical period as well as the modern period I wish that dance would have been documented more. Not just in the sense of pictures, videos or notations but also in the sense of personal writings, diaries, articles and so on. Even if dance for many, and as well for me, is a personal matter and praxis, I could never just end up keeping it to myself only but to share it through documents, publications and teaching.

My documentation dream is dancers sharing their personal diaries and writings more with each other.



— Alli Mattila dancing. Photo by Hanna Rätty.

Alli Mattila

24 years old, 3rd year dance student,
Outokumpu, Finland

1. How do you document your experiences in dance?

I write: keywords, stream of consciousness, 'set lists', questions, 'names of movements'.

I draw: stick figures, directions, maps, curves, segments.

I photograph: compositions, atmospheres, space.

I film: movement in space.

2. What is your motivation for documenting? Why do you document?

Documents themselves have no intrinsic value for me, but they serve as tools for parsing, self-evaluating, processing, and remembering. Especially documenting my solo work, it enables me to be in a dialogue with myself: writing down questions awakened by the process, I am driven to answer them and find solutions. Or, watching a run through from a video, I give myself feedback as if I was directing the work of another person. The meaning of documentation in structuring the work for myself is significant – it crystallises my understanding of a composition or a movement quality I am working on, and I remember it better when I translate the experience into something written or visual. The documentation also plays a big role in administering the work process. A big part of my notebook consists of project plans, lists, schedule drafts, key words or written down examples that help me to remember things, and in this way there is also something concrete to return to if something is forgotten.

3. What is the future of your documentation: do you return to them? If so, when and how often? Do you wish to publish something? What would be your documentation dream?

When an artistic process is going on, I use documentation actively, almost daily. I return to the previous day, I return to the beginning of the whole process, I return to 'that run through that went really well'. Sometimes I return to even further – to old notebooks or videos, maybe without a reason, or just to see where am I going now in relation to the past. At times I return to old notes also for practical reasons: a work done a few years ago is being warmed up, or I want to add something from the past to the current process I am in – an element, an exercise, a thought from something that I have already done before. I don't store my documents very systematically: actually I am not thinking that they would be of use in the future while I'm creating them.

At least, until now, I did not have any need or will to publish any of my documentations. On the other hand, the documents give birth to a lot of things that I hope will see daylight in the future – in publishing or in sharing with a work group and becoming part of an artistic work.

I don't know about dreams, but I would like to dive into the processes of other people, specifically through unfinished, raw documentations instead of clear and edited articles or Q&A's.

Oiva Mandelin

7 years old, Superhero Acrobatics
practitioner, Helsinki, Finland¹

1. How do you document your experiences in dance?

I don't. We've videoed dance but I have not shown them to anyone. (Edit: Dad has.)

2. What is your motivation for documenting? Why do you document?

I like to get pics but I don't draw about it or so.

3. What is the future of your documentation: do you return to them? If so, when and how often? Do you wish to publish something? What would be your documentation dream?

To keep them as memory.

NOTES

1. Interviewed by his father, choreographer Jarkko Mandelin. Interview translation by Ulla Mäkinen.