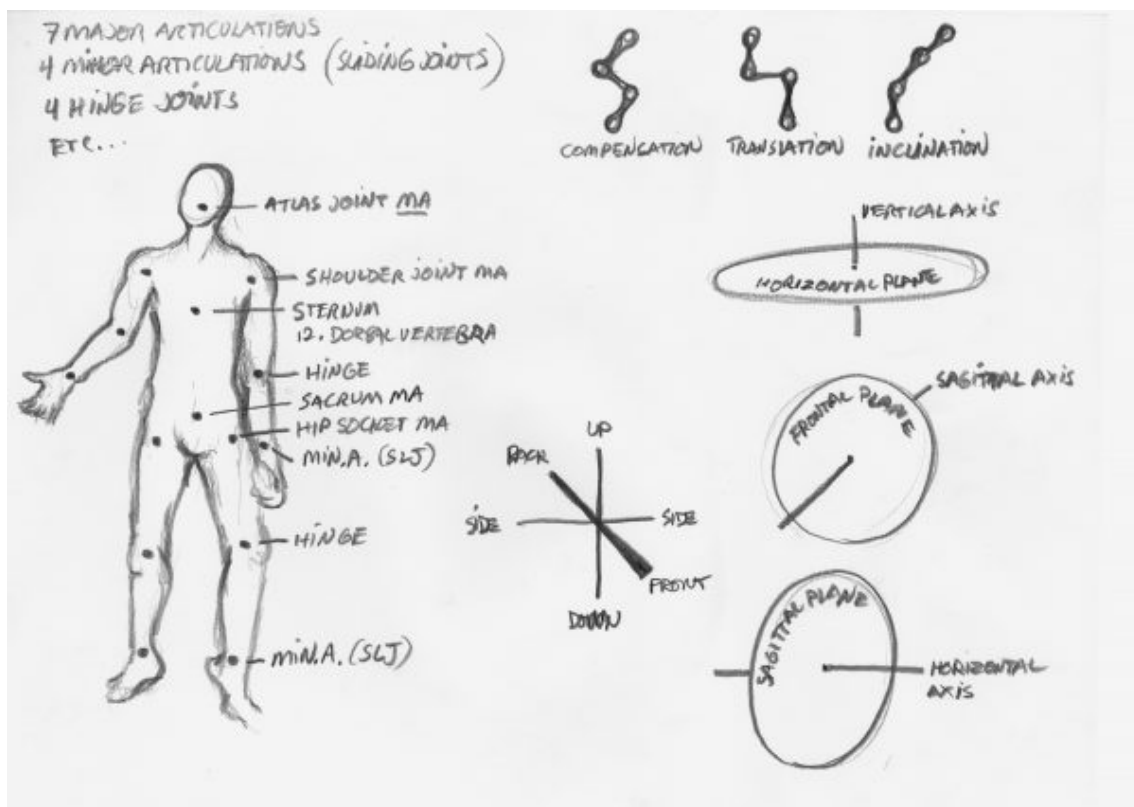


Capacity of Language: Interview with Frey Faust

Ulla Mäkinen

As part of the REFLEX research project on documentation practices in contemporary dance pedagogy, Ulla Mäkinen interviewed Frey Faust during the 4th IDOCDE Symposium in ImPulsTanz, on July 30th, 2016. This interview focuses on the documentation practice of Axis Syllabus and looks at the Human Movement Alphabet, HMA,¹ which is a process-oriented, universal notation system created by Frey Faust in collaboration with the Axis Syllabus community.²

The original interview was video documented by Andrea Keiz. This text is edited from the transcribed video and thus is an interpretation and a reworked edition of the original interview. For the online version, we include a short video from the original event for your reference.



— Human Movement Alphabet symbols, drawn by Frey Faust

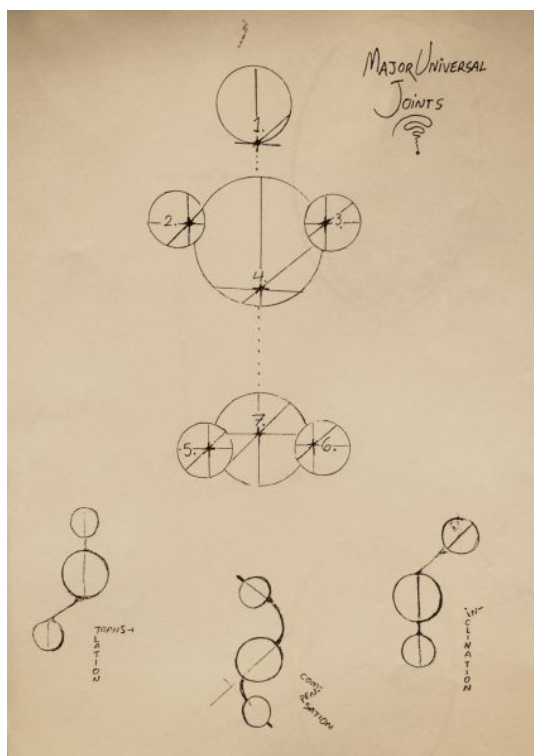
Ulla Mäkinen: I decided to contribute to the *Mind the Dance* by interviewing Frey Faust, a dancer, choreographer, teacher, writer, artisan and artist, and founder of the Axis Syllabus and the Axis Syllabus International Research Community ASIRC. I am very honored to have you here, welcome.

Frey Faust: Thank you.

Ulla: I want to start with explaining why I asked you to be here. I have been very interested in your work, as you have inevitably noticed – I have been practicing with you and the Axis community now for a few years and have gradually perceived that there is fundamental documentation practice going on in your work. I think that the way you have actually discovered new ways of documentation and created your own methods around that can be interesting for a lot more people to hear about.

Personally, I've found out that your work inspires me both to dance and to document for hours. That I find very rare. So I want to know, how do you do it?

Frey: I never thought that I would sit in front of a bunch of people and talk about this stuff, because I didn't think that many people would be interested. Even in my own community it has only been very recently that other members show interest. So you are lucky with your timing – before that everybody was going: “why do we need to do this?”, “do we need to do this?”, “...is this really important?” So, for me it has mostly been a personal quest. In reality, the Axis Syllabus has always been synonymous with the effort to try to create symbols that would represent sublimated understandings of the biomechanics and limits, and potentials of the human body, an ongoing effort. I understand that you are doing a written representation of this interview, so I will give you original material for that. You will be able to see the visuals of how this notation system, or documentation system, has evolved.



— First version of the symbol set for the Axis Syllabus, precursor of the Human Movement Alphabet, 1997.

Ulla: So actually, what you are telling me is that in the same time you started to collect the body of research, which you call the Axis Syllabus, you started the work with documentation. What was your motivation for documenting – what made you do that?

Frey: I don't really know what the impulse was. I think it is something mysterious. It might be something particular to the human species... We are symbol creators. We have experiences and we translate those, or we represent those experiences with an object creation process. We objectify subjectivity – isn't that what language is? For example, the letters that we know about in the different languages were or are still symbolic, originally thought of as magical. For me, symbol creation is a way to represent viewpoint. By objectifying our subjective experiences, we also raise our awareness of selfhood. The symbol/object allows us to return to and examine the things that went into making our perceptions and presumptions, to challenge or affirm them. Subjective social constructs that allow the construction/deconstruction of selfhood as a symbolic object...

The document becomes an object in and of itself, which promotes, or criticizes our experiences. Documentation is media. The weaponized potential of media includes the power to selectively reveal or obfuscate reality, reinvent the past, and prepare for or even design the future. A language is a potential tool – or a weapon – for destroying and for creating the self.

So, why would I make a documentation tool myself? Well, I came from a very poor family. I didn't have access to higher levels of learning: schools where I might have studied Laban or other existing notation systems.³ So I came up with my own. Once the Internet was available to me and I could access these systems, I did. But by that time I had too much affection for my own choices.

Ulla: But did you have somebody who was inspiring you to document?

Frey: ... people who inspired me ... long list!

Perhaps the first influence was my mother, Ellen Faust. She was a singer-songwriter/poet. She studied the symbol systems of ancient societies that used these symbols to refer to natural process, human character, seasons and various states of initiation that human beings may have to go through in order to access deeper awareness. Then the list goes on and on...

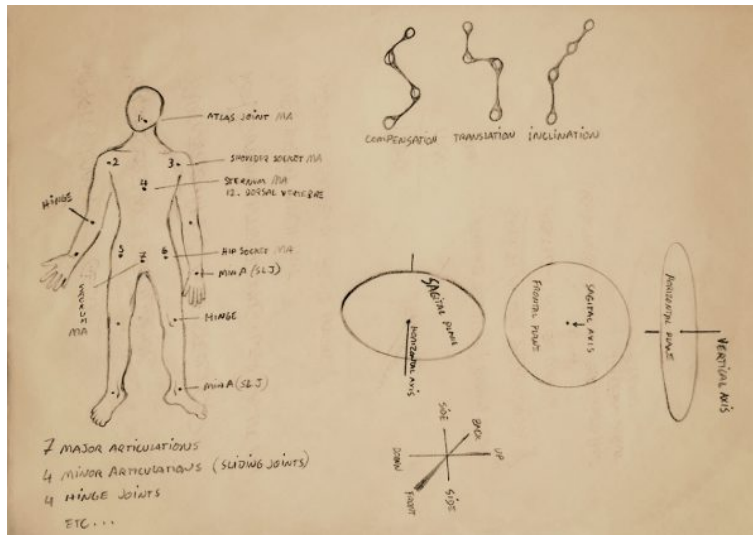
I started writing poetry when I was young. I think poetry is a symbolic use of language, because it's not actually describing specifics. It becomes a cipher or code that removes or hides historical fact, revealing meaning of it instead. Someone who reads the poem can then access your experience on their own terms. That's what I understand art to be about. Art creation seems like a natural extension of a symbol creation. Trying to create art without some method for remembering what you are working on is impossible, I would say, because you have to be able to refer to what you have done in order to continue to construct towards what you like.

Dance documentation through verbal language is problematic, because when we talk about something, we can only refer to one event at a time. Dance is much more like music in this regard; many things can happen at once.

In other words: in order to document movement appropriately, you need a system that allows you to describe several events at once, even overlapping or simultaneous events. When I first started to document my creative process, I made up words, which described

the event, and a couple of months later I had no idea what those words meant. That is what, I think, impelled me to develop a more coherent method of describing movement ideas: to accurately articulate biomechanical processes that comprised movements.

Ulla: When I first encountered the Axis Syllabus, I was impressed by the AS community's precise use of language in both the written form and practice-oriented class. You use very specific terms from the sciences, such as anatomy, physics and biomechanics. I am curious, how did you come to that?



— First version of the symbol set for the Axis Syllabus, precursor of the Human Movement Alphabet, 1997.

Frey: Poetic descriptions of movement are evocative, but they are sometimes too ambiguous or misleading. For example, it's common for dancers to believe they can lift their legs to the front or side with their hamstrings, or that the center of gravity of the body is a fixed point. When erroneous beliefs about how our bodies work are institutionalized, they might slow progress towards autonomy, or even sponsor injury. Beliefs benefit from a concerted effort to relativize subjectivity. For example, one of the advantages of the laic state is that it guarantees plurality of religion. I feel that we need some kind of laic discipline for dance that doesn't police the plurality of belief, or poetic interpretation or presentation, but gives context for all, or at least many of them. That's why I try to base my languaging in terms that are hopefully more neutral: known physical attributes and limitations, and the laws of physics. In my experience, these are bodies of knowledge and terms that allow specificity of context for many approaches and investigations of how we move – allowing, rather than negating, fantasy in the perception of movement.

Ulla: My experience is that the language you choose also changes the experience of dancing, that the terminology used supports both the understanding of the body dancing as well as the documenting of the dance. I also feel that lack of clarity is confusing, and that when unclear terms are used it makes it harder to understand what is meant, and makes the document more obscure and 'elitaire'. For example, I think describing a movement by saying "open the hip joint", is ambiguous. What do you say?

Frey: If I had been in the class where that term was used, I probably would have asked the teacher what they meant, or what they were referring to as 'open'. Using unclear

terms is a way of hiding knowledge... encrypting it. Instead of mystifying, clear terms provide a key to understanding. The ambiguous term 'open' has become a referential symbol, an object – as an institutionally approved, encrypted object, which requires an 'expert' to decrypt. A clear term can also be objectified, but hopefully a key would allow someone to understand what one needs to do to overcome an inhibition or perform a specific task without the need of too much instruction. This kind of autonomy might only be possible after certain assumptions have been dismantled.

I think the advent of language provided the means for both the suffocating of and the development of critical thought. In general, terms and symbols give us the means to both delude and inform, to dissolve or consolidate prejudice. Hopefully, the HMA is a knowledge building project here, something that provides accurate representation for complex physical process, something that is based on a rigorous, ongoing study of the human body, something that could be a useful tool for a wide range of people from diverse cultural and national backgrounds... break dancer, a classical dancer, a juggler, a dock-worker, a mother, a doctor... etc.

Ulla: In the tutorial for The Human Movement Alphabet you encourage playful interpretation of the symbols, and you proposed an interpretable score. I could read it in different ways – probably definitely read it in a different way than your starting point or your imagined movement idea. Are you implying that documentation is about interpretation, rather than replication? Do you mean that the document, rather than sacrosanct, is something that is ours to use, to play with, to derive dialects from? If I use the HMA, could I write down the same score in a different way?

Frey: Yes and no... In one sense, what is written will always require interpretation, because unlike a video, it calls on us to use our imaginations. However, the HMA can also be very specific and comprehensive. But... even if you intend to transmit or discuss a particular sequence, you can change the focus by referring to different body parts that are involved or prioritizing a description of the driving forces, etc. In any case, a written description always passes through the imagination of the interpreter. It must be appropriated in a way that replicating movement that is shown or learned from video does not allow. That is a profound advantage in my view: it is permission to be creative.

I don't really understand why, but one of the first questions I get asked when I start to present the notation system is: when you write something down, and someone does it, is it going to be exactly the way you wanted it? There's a sense that whatever one writes, when it concerns movement, has to be performed exactly how the writer meant it.

There is not this expectation in music... each orchestra is going to play a partition differently, each director is going to direct it differently. That is the beauty of notation. It's an invitation to reinterpretation rather than replication. Writing in general gives us something to spring from, a reference for creativity.

Ulla: Would you say that it is a motivation for documenting?

Frey: Yes. One of the things that happened to me when I was growing up, which I will always regret, was that I lost a book with all my poems. I spent three years in mourning. I couldn't write another poem for three years. The book was not just a record. It provided further stimulation and inspiration. I could map my own progress. This ability, it gave me to review and helped me become more articulate, less accusatory, dramatic or self indulgent. It helped me to mature in my appraisal of sensation. The loss created a vacuum, a loss of orientation.

Ulla: Interesting. What do we want to save, what do we store? What do we decide to document? What is private, what do we make public and how do these things keep evolving? One of the things that I find very impressive in your work is that you keep editing. There is no final version. You will sometimes publicly admit an error and alter it. Can you speak about this process – deciding what to keep, what to change, what to develop?

Frey: Part of the revision process is keeping in mind that whatever I think is true will at some point be only what I thought was true. I try to hold my presumptions lightly, to question them often. When somebody else comes with information that could either improve or contradict my understanding of what I thought was true, I consider it carefully. On the other hand, if I am the one arriving with contradictory information, my effort will be to offer rather than impose this information. People are often rude and insulting to each other when they disagree. I think this slows down the exchange of ideas, the correction of presumptions.

I am interested in an inspired dialogue, because I feel that I benefit from that, rather than creating a specific identity or trademark. The product renders knowledge exclusive, creating elite advantage on one side, deprivation on the other. I think there is more long term benefit for me personally when a larger number of people are educated. So this is why I've rejected any attempts to brand the Axis Syllabus, and resist the tendency to see the AS community as promoting a specific point of view against or for a particular discipline in the dance world, or thinking of it as a specific approach or discipline that has salutary or artistic benefit or whatever. But seeing it as more of a forum which could include other forums which can insert itself into institutions or not, and be more like a fringe organization, a loose informal grouping of people who are mutually interested in pooling information, not just for themselves but for public benefit.

I think what I do in my class is unique. I hope! That's what I can sell. That's my brand. And I would hope each person in the Axis community would be able to get the credit that they deserve for the innovations and the ideas that they bring to their own work. So I'd rather that happen, than a siphoning off all this individual creativity into a corporate identity. I see the Axis Syllabus as a list, an archive, a database, and the Axis community as an information gatherer. It is making sure that whatever is in that resource is up to date. But we're not the only gatherers. There are 150 people in the group, but we also have lots of informal collaborations outside of the group, and an email list with about six thousand people on it now.

We don't all have to teach the same thing, and everybody gets to use the information in their own way, and there is a danger to that. Say there's an Axis Syllabus teacher in Cotonou, Africa, another Axis teacher elsewhere might not know what kind of work they're doing or what they're into, and not knowing if that person is representing the work in a way that they would prefer. That is why we get together so often, and why the teacher certification process is so slow. In twenty years we've only certified thirty people. That's an indication – we are not an Axis Syllabus teacher factory.

Ulla: When I presented the idea of this interview and discussing documentation with you, we talked about documenting the experiences of the students, or the reactions of the students after you as teacher have given them information or corrections. What about documenting teaching practices or process?

Frey: Student experience is certainly a part of the process or practice of teaching. Each teacher documents their work as they wish, I think. I am certainly busy with this. Notating phrases for example, has been very helpful. Writing movement out, I realize

that there is a lot going on that I didn't realize was happening. Discovering this has made it possible to discuss these details with more accuracy. Sometimes I've been able to unravel physical inhibitions and facilitate skill acquisition by finding the transition moment where the person was overlooking something, or depriving themselves of options.

Just as an exercise, if you want to try this, write down what happens in a cartwheel. Yes – just one. It will blow your mind. It is impossible to write down everything that happens, but the exercise is important, the exercise reveals something essential: that you can't see or talk about everything, and that you're going to be focusing on some things and not others. Besides, no matter how much you deepen or detail your scan of what's going on, you'll always miss something. I think that's been very useful for me in helping people to move.

I don't assume anymore. I go up to someone and I see. My first approach would be to say, my impression is... And I really mean it, because I'm not actually sure. I think I know what I am seeing, but that's my interpretation – behaving as I think a good scientist should. My guarded interpretation of a data is... And let's see if that is actually true. Let's test it against practice. So each situation, where I have an exchange with a student over an inhibition, is a moment to be in the lab, to see if that instance, that context, is going to give us some practical information. Of course, over twenty years or so, you gather information and backlog it for similar instances, always being careful to adapt.

Ulla: Yes, so there is a lot of interpretation happening, and a lot of things we don't see...

And I thought of the title of this symposium where we're at right now, 'The Importance of Being [Un]Necessary', and I thought, is there something you would say is necessary to understand, or that is in the core, because there's all these ways that we can interpret? Is there something that you would like people to get the way that you document it, or the way you're thinking about it?

Frey: Yes, the title is problematic. I think it was a mistake for artists to participate in the market economy. I don't think what we do has the fictitious value of commodities. What we do has real value. It is the motor for social evolution – my opinion of course. I think art promotes the examination of self at the highest level: the dissolving of boundaries. It is not gender neutral, it is gender curious, not a-political, politically curious. It is curious and therefore it is subversive... gently subversive, and it takes all these different things and combines them and resynthesizes them and gives us ways to re-examine. In that sense, it's of inestimable real value, not monetary value. Money is a symbol for value. Its worth is fictional and capricious. So when we say unnecessary, that's a term that could only apply if you think of art in terms of profit and trade. In my opinion, that's not what this is about. Just sit down at the beach and look at the ocean. Sit under the stars. Try to picture being slung around the earth as it spins on its orbit and being propelled through space along with the sun... try to empathize with a dockworker, a murderer, a pregnant mother... that's the artist's work, to sensitize themselves to these and other things and recapitulate that experience: An important, essential social function.

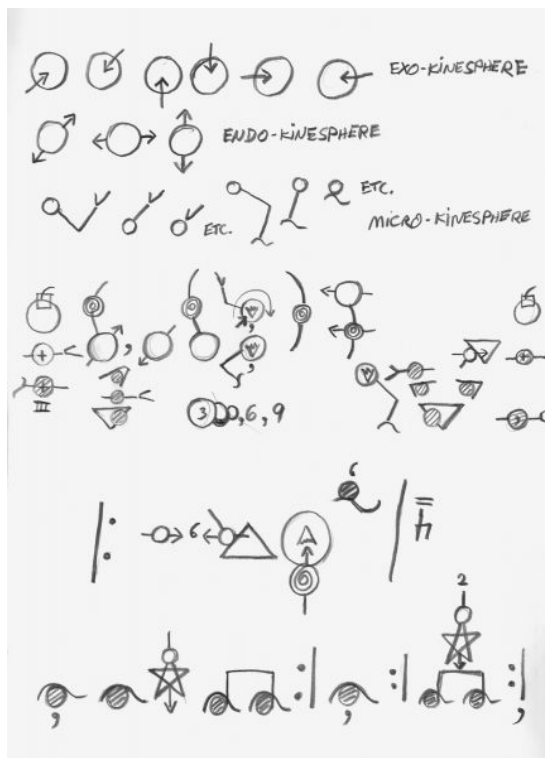
Anthropologists understand the distinction between pre-civilization and civilization when they find artistically made things and artwork. How people made things, how they described status, how they codified their religions, and how they began to create languages that would transmit to future generations or project to those who weren't there yet. So this is what I think what art is about. It is fundamentally necessary. Without it there's no point, no culture.

Ulla: How do you see the future? What is your wish for the future of the HMA, and the documentation that you're doing?

Frey: My sincerest wish for the HMA is that it becomes a widely used language for describing human movement. Although my friends argue that I should patent or copyright it, I feel these 'protections' would only slow the accessibility and use of the system. My reward would be, to be able to have a regular exchange in the HMA with people across national and lingual boundaries. As far as the AS community is concerned, I think we are one in many such knowledge-gathering initiatives, like IDOCDE. We are a node in an ecology of knowledge that will be fluidly hierarchical and nonhierarchical, and we will contribute to a richer palette of access for people, if we are allowed – I think that's what I can see coming.

Ulla: Thank you.

Frey: You're very welcome. Thank you for the honor!



— Human Movement Alphabet symbols, drawn by Frey Faust

NOTES

1. To read more on the HMA, please visit <http://www.idocde.net/idocs/1792> [01.04.2017]
2. To read more about Axis Syllabus, please visit www.axisyllabus.org
3. For more content on the issue of notation you can see Bertha Bermudez' article Dance Notation in this volume.