

Double dialogues - conference with a difference

The following paper was referenced in the introduction to the 'matter' shown and performed on Saturday 16 November 1996.

Phenomenological research: a case study.

Don Asker

Introduction

I should say at the outset that I have chosen to talk about my research in the arts not because it is made problematic by any prevailing attitude of institutionalised academia, but because I'm actually finding a way to do what I want to do. This is not to say I don't have problems with the 'climate' out there. I do find access to research monies difficult and priorities, weightings and guidelines seem to leave artistic research at the margins. However there is a bright side:

I have seen two Melbourne University Post Graduate Scholarships awarded to choreographers in the school of dance at the Victorian College of the Arts in the past two years and this year I have been the beneficiary of a minor research grant from the VCA. So as many others have discovered the system can be sympathetic. In my case I've found support and mentoring through a graduate program at a University for my particular inquiry and there is a reflexive connection between that research and my own artistic practice. Before I talk about what I am doing I should give a little background.

My career as performance artist/dancer/choreographer and director spans several decades with considerable time spent working in Europe, Asia and the Americas. For the past seven years I have been involved in tertiary education most of which has been at the Victorian College of the Arts. I currently coordinate graduate studies in the School of Dance with a focus on choreography and animateuring. In 1995 I completed an MA through the University of Melbourne's English Department by dissertation. Interestingly enough when it came to locating information about the practice of Australian contemporary dance artists it was the artist's personal experience, insights and detail that somehow was often missing or hard to find. Over the past few years I have begun to look more closely at the way I perform, explore and express myself. Somewhere in this period my inquiry into personal meanings arising for artists working in multi-modal improvisations seems to have started and now seems to be occupying much of my research time. In a sense it is also the essence of my creative work.

Background to the project

What characterises my research is its focus on processes underpinning creative and artistic work. I am not concerned to contextualise a body of existing work or even work that is being made, but I am investigating the 'experience' of artmaking. I will clarify this later in my presentation. Through the last five years I have

directed a number of interdisciplinary collaborative projects and I notice something has changed in the art making process. It is hard to pin point but there is more emphasis on allowing the essence of the experience of the making - the 'doing' within the work process more space, time and consequently more focus. There is more time given to reflection and personal responding along the way. And here lies a fairly important issue for me. The inquiry itself is located in a process that ranges across interpersonal and intra personal terrain. It is focussed on experiences which are mostly occurring within an improvising context. It is not directly connected to realising a piece or pieces of art, but I think my colleagues and I are aware of the many potentials for art making. I'm also conscious that the personal understanding, personal meanings and discoveries which permeate my journals, research papers and art work coexist in a complex way. They are of most meaning for me now as a collection.

The focus upon personal meanings is not something that has occurred suddenly. I suspect that I have always worked to understand and give meaning to my life through my work. But I have become aware that the question of what is the essence of my experiences of the world around me has surfaced quite strongly. In his publication focussed on phenomenological research "Practicing Phenomenological Writing", Van Maanen describes the study of essences as "the study of the world as we immediately experience it rather than as we conceptualise, categorise or theorise about it."¹⁰ Which brings me to my current concern *which I think is* to gain insight into the way I experience myself as an improvising artist and how that experience is further reflected in my choreographic practice.

The challenge lies in finding ways to excavate for essences or the underpinning themes that may be consciously or unconsciously implicated in the work that I am developing. Unlike Van Maanen who is concerned that the description of essences should be found in language(s), I am prepared to seek understanding of the nature of the phenomenon of the dance through responses that are not necessarily written and which may involve other artistic disciplines. This is not to say that am I not interested to find the "essence" and articulate it in written language, and here lies my attraction to the notion of "Double Dialogues", however I am suggesting that the essences of the experience of improvising may be surfacing through other modalities such as sound, or visual 2 or 3-D art, and all of these may contribute to the deeper understanding of the experience.

Several questions are arising such as how does the description of the experience and the apprehension of the essences of the experience of art making, in my case through forms of improvisation within diverse structures and contexts, relate to the creative process that is often intrinsic to the process of art making anyway? The results so far indicate the opening up of oneself to the experience, the implicating of oneself totally in the process, affords a window of opportunity for

¹⁰ van Maanen,(1984) *Practicing Phenomenological Writing* , p1

Double dialogues - conference with a difference

The following paper was referenced in the introduction to the 'matter' shown and performed on Saturday 16 November 1996.

Phenomenological research: a case study.

Don Asker

Introduction

I should say at the outset that I have chosen to talk about my research in the arts not because it is made problematic by any prevailing attitude of institutionalised academia, but because I'm actually finding a way to do what I want to do. This is not to say I don't have problems with the 'climate' out there. I do find access to research monies difficult and priorities, weightings and guidelines seem to leave artistic research at the margins. However there is a bright side:

I have seen two Melbourne University Post Graduate Scholarships awarded to choreographers in the school of dance at the Victorian College of the Arts in the past two years and this year I have been the beneficiary of a minor research grant from the VCA. So as many others have discovered the system can be sympathetic. In my case I've found support and mentoring through a graduate program at a University for my particular inquiry and there is a reflexive connection between that research and my own artistic practice. Before I talk about what I am doing I should give a little background.

My career as performance artist/dancer/choreographer and director spans several decades with considerable time spent working in Europe, Asia and the Americas. For the past seven years I have been involved in tertiary education most of which has been at the Victorian College of the Arts. I currently coordinate graduate studies in the School of Dance with a focus on choreography and animateuring. In 1995 I completed an MA through the University of Melbourne's English Department by dissertation. Interestingly enough when it came to locating information about the practice of Australian contemporary dance artists it was the artist's personal experience, insights and detail that somehow was often missing or hard to find. Over the past few years I have begun to look more closely at the way I perform, explore and express myself. Somewhere in this period my inquiry into personal meanings arising for artists working in multi-modal improvisations seems to have started and now seems to be occupying much of my research time. In a sense it is also the essence of my creative work.

Background to the project

What characterises my research is its focus on processes underpinning creative and artistic work. I am not concerned to contextualise a body of existing work or even work that is being made, but I am investigating the 'experience' of artmaking. I will clarify this later in my presentation. Through the last five years I have

directed a number of interdisciplinary collaborative projects and I notice something has changed in the art making process. It is hard to pin point but there is more emphasis on allowing the essence of the experience of the making - the 'doing' within the work process more space, time and consequently more focus. There is more time given to reflection and personal responding along the way. And here lies a fairly important issue for me. The inquiry itself is located in a process that ranges across interpersonal and intra personal terrain. It is focussed on experiences which are mostly occurring within an improvising context. It is not directly connected to realising a piece or pieces of art, but I think my colleagues and I are aware of the many potentials for art making. I'm also conscious that the personal understanding, personal meanings and discoveries which permeate my journals, research papers and art work coexist in a complex way. They are of most meaning for me now as a collection.

The focus upon personal meanings is not something that has occurred suddenly. I suspect that I have always worked to understand and give meaning to my life through my work. But I have become aware that the question of what is the essence of my experiences of the world around me has surfaced quite strongly. In his publication focussed on phenomenological research "Practicing Phenomenological Writing", Van Maanen describes the study of essences as "the study of the world as we immediately experience it rather than as we conceptualise, categorise or theorise about it."¹⁰ Which brings me to my current concern *which I think is* to gain insight into the way I experience myself as an improvising artist and how that experience is further reflected in my choreographic practice.

The challenge lies in finding ways to excavate for essences or the underpinning themes that may be consciously or unconsciously implicated in the work that I am developing. Unlike Van Maanen who is concerned that the description of essences should be found in language(s), I am prepared to seek understanding of the nature of the phenomenon of the dance through responses that are not necessarily written and which may involve other artistic disciplines. This is not to say that am I not interested to find the "essence" and articulate it in written language, and here lies my attraction to the notion of "Double Dialogues", however I am suggesting that the essences of the experience of improvising may be surfacing through other modalities such as sound, or visual 2 or 3-D art, and all of these may contribute to the deeper understanding of the experience.

Several questions are arising such as how does the description of the experience and the apprehension of the essences of the experience of art making, in my case through forms of improvisation within diverse structures and contexts, relate to the creative process that is often intrinsic to the process of art making anyway? The results so far indicate the opening up of oneself to the experience, the implicating of oneself totally in the process, affords a window of opportunity for

¹⁰ van Maanen,(1984) *Practicing Phenomenological Writing* , p1

locating the very subjective experience of the 'artist' in a larger spectrum of creative work. The process is relatively slow and involved. As Van Maanen says in his monograph on phenomenological research and writing, it is a labour of time and involves considerable distillation - producing at the end something that seems disarmingly small, he goes on to say and I quote,

"It seems all somewhat absurd until we begin to discern the silence in the writing - the cultivation of one's being from which the words begin to proliferate in haltingly issued groupings, then finally an eight, or twelve or fifteen page paper, much less completed than interrupted, a blushing response to a call to say something worth saying, to actually say something while being thoughtfully aware of the ease with which such speaking tends to reduce to the sometimes academic chatter of properly footnoted but merely reshuffled pieces of knowledge from the mouth or pen of the teacher-professor."

Van Maanen seems to infer that the author of the research (specifically phenomenological research using some sort of grounded theory or heuristic inquiry) is getting close to the frontier of the as yet unknown, the lesser chartered waters of our experience. If artists and creative people are searching or endeavouring to give some form to their ideas, intuitions or feelings then they are very close to the type of research that Van Maanen is talking about. I'm not sure that mine is a blushing response to a "call to say something worth saying", but I know that the process is accompanied by all sorts of questions. There is "a call to say something" and in the past I haven't really stopped to think much about where that call comes from.

History of the project:

The work that has engaged me over the past 18 months has increasingly reflected on the shared experience with my colleagues. A focus group for this was a collection of VCA staff comprising writer/director Richard Murphett, composer Mark Pollard, actor/director Daryl Wilkinson, film maker Nubar Ghazarian, visual artist Julie Irving and myself. We met weekly for over a year as a multi-modal performance group called '*Ways of Seeing*'. Our way of interacting shifted as we shared perspectives and crossed to and from our specialist areas. A host of possible directions emerged and some of these were explored and even given possible performance structures. What stood out from this work was the richness of our personal experience. There were connections made on many levels, sparking interpersonal dialogues and intra personal enquires.

More recently I have continued to be involved in ongoing work with subgroups from '*Ways of Seeing*' augmented by several other collaborators. The focus has been left on the process. Goals are less definitely hatched in, more space being left for patterns to emerge, perhaps new things to unfold. We are giving time for the experience of being in 'creative play' together. Through these series I have continued to chart our course. Although not all sessions were targeted for data

locating the very subjective experience of the 'artist' in a larger spectrum of creative work. The process is relatively slow and involved. As Van Maanen says in his monograph on phenomenological research and writing, it is a labour of time and involves considerable distillation - producing at the end something that seems disarmingly small, he goes on to say and I quote,

"It seems all somewhat absurd until we begin to discern the silence in the writing - the cultivation of one's being from which the words begin to proliferate in haltingly issued groupings, then finally an eight, or twelve or fifteen page paper, much less completed than interrupted, a blushing response to a call to say something worth saying, to actually say something while being thoughtfully aware of the ease with which such speaking tends to reduce to the sometimes academic chatter of properly footnoted but merely reshuffled pieces of knowledge from the mouth or pen of the teacher-professor."

Van Maanen seems to infer that the author of the research (specifically phenomenological research using some sort of grounded theory or heuristic inquiry) is getting close to the frontier of the as yet unknown, the lesser chartered waters of our experience. If artists and creative people are searching or endeavouring to give some form to their ideas, intuitions or feelings then they are very close to the type of research that Van Maanen is talking about. I'm not sure that mine is a blushing response to a "call to say something worth saying", but I know that the process is accompanied by all sorts of questions. There is "a call to say something" and in the past I haven't really stopped to think much about where that call comes from.

History of the project:

The work that has engaged me over the past 18 months has increasingly reflected on the shared experience with my colleagues. A focus group for this was a collection of VCA staff comprising writer/director Richard Murphett, composer Mark Pollard, actor/director Daryl Wilkinson, film maker Nubar Ghazarian, visual artist Julie Irving and myself. We met weekly for over a year as a multi-modal performance group called '*Ways of Seeing*'. Our way of interacting shifted as we shared perspectives and crossed to and from our specialist areas. A host of possible directions emerged and some of these were explored and even given possible performance structures. What stood out from this work was the richness of our personal experience. There were connections made on many levels, sparking interpersonal dialogues and intra personal enquires.

More recently I have continued to be involved in ongoing work with subgroups from '*Ways of Seeing*' augmented by several other collaborators. The focus has been left on the process. Goals are less definitely hatched in, more space being left for patterns to emerge, perhaps new things to unfold. We are giving time for the experience of being in 'creative play' together. Through these series I have continued to chart our course. Although not all sessions were targeted for data

gathering, most were documented on video and care was made to ensure sound recording was reasonable. At the chosen improvisations, the responses of the participants were collected through interview and discussion. A consultant was given the responsibility for conducting interviews and the questions predetermined to ensure that the focus of the inquiry was kept.

Because all the participants had prior creative experience together and shared specific performance-making interests over an extended period, there was already a number of threads or themes that were in a manner of speaking in the process of unravelling. These themes reflected particular/subjective interests and had a history of being part of the group dialogue. So in effect the participants became the subjects. There was no need to look for a theme outside of ourselves. The modalities that we used to explore our intra and inter personal improvising was left open. This became the raw nerve aspect of our work together when individuals were sometimes drawn away from specialist skills and into less familiar modes. Then motivation, intention and inner /self expression took the individual to creative points that sometimes seemed to have special spontaneity and integrity. As this work progressed it also led to more focussed interpersonal dialogues. A recent assessment by colleagues suggests there might be three ways of looking at our activities and experiences:

- Firstly individual depictions are emerging. They could be made in writing or in other ways and I sense they can also be performed.
- Secondly a perspective is emerging of several related groups of people engaged in common activity. This is manifesting in the various improvisations.
- Thirdly it is possible to develop a depiction of the experience of the construction of something which is a piece of art.

Brief outline of methodology:

Currently there are two ongoing series of processes which share some participants:

- One involves the video medium but it is also generating other responses which are emerging as live performance.
- The second is largely about extending work or matter that is arising from multi modal performance improvisation.

At this juncture my own involvement in the creative experience is important. I am participant observer if you like and my 'artistic' colleagues constitute a collaborative cell. along with an external consultant or devils advocate. It is possible that the number of differently constituted groups might grow beyond this and constitute in effect the equivalent of a number of separate case studies.

The research has an heuristic form. I'm using the word coined by Moustakis to describe phenomenological research that is concerned with the nature and meaning of experience - where the researcher develops methods and procedures for further investigation and analysis. As Moustakis puts it in his "Phenomenological Research Methods"¹¹ publication, "the self of the researcher is present throughout the process and, while understanding the phenomenon with increasing depth, the researcher also experiences growing self awareness and self-knowledge," end of quote.

Through the studies I am developing a depiction that is closely tied to the experience of improvising, and possibly of being involved in the creation or making of an artistic piece of work. It should be read or experienced in association with the matter of the improvising work. My personal experiencing that has led to the depiction that emerges is of course reflected in the images, actions, environments and sounds that were part of the "work" of doing . The depiction is not the whole of the experience however, because I sense that some of my experience is deeply embedded in the 'performance', in my non verbal behaviour, making it difficult and indeed perhaps too simplistic to put words to. In this respect part of the understanding of my experience remains locked with me - it is not possible for anyone to join me and fully share that performance experience. In saying this I don't want to diminish the value of my research at all, only to suggest that the complexities and boundaries to fully understanding the "what" of my creative performance are considerable.

It seems that the fruits of my research lie in the detail of what I am doing, how I am experiencing it and how other collaborators are perceiving that experience with me. In the longer term the research may permit further interpolation and interpretation. It may suggest more universal meanings and it may give rise to forms of artistic performance or art making, but for the moment that does not become part of my concern. Ideas and possibilities are unfolding, and it seems that the collaborative cell is perpetually facing shifting crossroads between an ongoing improvising with the periodic assemblages of objects, choreographies, videos, and sounds and the precipitation or realising of more solid structures that could be called performances.

In one series involving myself with three other colleagues we have been locating the work at a number of different sites. Within this cell one of the members commented that the themes seemed to reflect on intimacy, on personal boundaries, on a journey. The work is unfolding and unresolved. The possibility of the matter having "value" as new performance is exciting but not the goal. The primary play is allowing the emergence of tones or qualities of experience. Some of this may well find its way into print and be the matter of "blushing responses", other aspects will emerge in movement in different modes and mediums.

¹¹ Moustakis, Clark, *Phenomenological Research Methods*, Sage: London, 1994

About the matter to be 'shown and performed'

What we'll show now is some of the material that has arisen from the work. It is fragmentary and reflects the fact that we are not placing any emphasis at this stage to forming large structures. Some of it provides points of contact and dialogue. Nevertheless these fragments are connected by common themes and us as co-researchers.

I would like to acknowledge my colleagues who have joined me tonight:- Mark Pollard, composer ; Jane Mortiss, choreographer; Joanna Lloyd, performer and also Nubar Ghazarian, film maker, who has allowed us use some roughly edited documentation of our early process.