



PEER-REVIEWED ARTICLE

TOWARDS ASTROEMBODIED
CHOREOSTRUCTIONS:
DEVIATING FROM
CHOREOGRAPHING
TO CHOREOREADING

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ABSTRACT

In this article, I introduce the notion of ‘choreostruction’, which has emerged during my doctoral research project *Choreography as Reading Practice* in the Performing Arts Research Centre at the University of the Arts, Helsinki (2013–2019). The term stems from studying the French philosopher Jean Luc Nancy’s notion *struccion*, which he examines in depth in dialogue with the French astrophysicist and philosopher Aurélien Barrau in the book *What’s these Worlds Coming to?* (2015). In the book, the concept of struccion is introduced as one of the concepts that could help us understand how “we are not living in one world but worlds”, and how we “no longer create, but appropriate and montage” (quotes from the book cover). I approach the notion and its operative potential by exposing one experimental choreographic work that I am still processing and in which the operative move in my choreographic practice from composition to attention is one important shift that connects my practice to the notion of *struccion*. The term ‘choreostruction’ is an attempt to materialize the dialogue between my artistic practice and my understanding of Nancy’s notion of *struccion*. Other influencing references of this process come from the writings of philosophers Thomas Nail and Jaana Parviainen and artworks from the history of site-specific art.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Simo Kellokumpu is a Finnish choreographer and a researcher based in Helsinki. He received his DfA (Doctor of Arts) from the Performing Arts Research Center, Theatre Academy, Finland in 2019. His artistic works examine the choreographic relations between corporeality and materiality in various scales and contexts. His work operates in the entanglement of contemporary speculative fiction, interplanetary culture, astrobiology, and queer(ing) space. Besides his solo work, Kellokumpu has been collaborating with the French artist Vincent Roumagnac since 2010, and he is a founding member of the *ChoreoQ1A* research cluster with artists and researchers Outi Condit and Vincent Roumagnac.

Keywords: *choreography, choreoreading, movement, embodiment, place, space, site*

ARTISTIC RESEARCH AIM AND CONTEXT

In this article, I introduce the notion of *choreostruction*, which has emerged during my doctoral research project *Choreography as Reading Practice* in the Performing Arts Research Centre at the University of the Arts Helsinki (2013–2019). The term stems from studying the French philosopher Jean Luc Nancy's notion *struction*, which he examines in depth in dialogue with the French astrophysicist and philosopher Aurélien Barrau in the book *What's these Worlds Coming to?* (2015). Nancy's term fits well with my doctoral research process, in which I think of choreographic practice as something other than the practice of construction. By construction in the context of choreography, I refer to my understanding of making choreography from that viewpoint, in which the coherent linearly unfolding dramaturgical piece is the artistic aim and outcome of the choreographing process. Nancy's term also seemed the right one (or an appropriate one) to be examined more closely in the process in which my artistic practice has transformed from *choreographing* to *choreoreading*. In short, in my doctoral project I examined the dynamics between writing and reading from the perspective of choreographic practice. My doctoral project can be understood as an introduction to the notion of choreoreading. Through this process, I examined how in the word *choreography* the prefix *choreo* can have various practical attributes. For this reason, I often speak about choreo-orientated practice. *Choreostruction* then can be understood as a seed growing from these sources, and this is my first attempt to articulate it in a more detailed manner.

FIRST STEPS

Let me start with a simple experiment. First, I take a few steps in some direction and stop. Once I have the sense that I have arrived, I utter the following sentence: "I am now here". Then I walk calmly to another spot. Once I feel that I have arrived, I repeat "I am now here". Then I repeat it one more time. I am paying attention to what happens especially when I stop. When do I arrive? How do I arrive? Where do I arrive? I take my time with this. Now, let me think about the word 'here' in the sentence and its relation to movement. What does this "here" mean? How does "here" operate? What produces this "here"? What is it that is here in this here and how?

This is how I started the artistic process with #CHARP_solo (*Liminal Space Opera*), which I will return to later in this article, and this is also how I wanted to start this article. The aim of the article is to bring critical attention to choreo-orientated practice, which examines the kinesthetic conditions from which the choreo-graphic as performed by the human body emerges. My practice is based on understanding that everything moves, as philosopher Thomas Nail puts it, in a way that movement is not reducible to space and time, but ontologically equal with those two dimensions (Nail, 2019, p. 43–50). I am curious to explore how this starting point affects the practice and what kind of choreographic art is produced when movement is not placed on or in space and time, but taken as a condition for life to emerge from lifeless material. The task is philosophically and scientifically beyond my understanding, but through making art from this starting point I can build embodied understanding step by step about the notion of 'movement' and about the relation between movement and choreo-orientated artistic practice.

Together with examining the etymological roots of the word *choreography*, and more precisely the prefix *choreo*, the notion of *struction* by Nancy, operates as the main theoretical dialogue partners for my artistic investigations of how choreographic practice escapes the logic of linear written construction as I earlier understood it. Within the framework of this special issue 'Choreography Now', I bring together the prefix *choreo* with the notion of *struction* and ponder what kind of new perspectives this combination could launch in the realm of choreographic art. I have explored this agglomeration in my artistic practice and in my doctoral artistic research project, which I concluded in 2019. During the research process, I examined choreo-orientated practice, thinking, and sensitivity in terms of a multi-sensorial dynamic process in transforming surroundings through such reading that recognizes various simultaneous multi-directional movements and forces that generate the specific motional material circumstances of various concrete contexts. In short, instead of emphasizing the writing/graphing practice with the prefix *choreo*, I have taken a closer look at the choreo-sensitivity of reading, and especially hyper-reading. In the history of choreographic art, this perspective within the dynamics of writing and reading has not received attention and has not been examined thoroughly. This is the gap in which my doctoral research project took place.

In the framework of this article it is sufficient to mention that in my doctoral project the examination between reading and writing happened through exploring the re-positioning of my body and practice with and in the relations of movement, place, space and context. This process also led me to the inquiry of how, in my place-responsive artistic practice, the notion of *place* extends towards outer space. This includes exposing the choreo-orientated practice, which processes non-linear simultaneous incoherent multiplicities and in which the scale of movement challenges the immediate perception and experience, and as such also goes beyond my understanding. According to these starting points, choreography becomes the result of an intense situational and contextual inquiry of the movements that constitute that place in which the artistic proposal takes place. In other words, in choreographic frameworks the bodily practice delves into the dynamics of embodied reading and writing in order to materialize the translations of the movements and kinesthetic conditions that choreograph my performing human body.

THE PREFIX *CHOREO*

In my choreo-orientated practice, choreography and movement are coupled with each other. But how? One of my takes is that in the notion of *choreography*, the prefix *choreo* operates as an artistic mode, which can have different attributes: for example, *graphing* or *reading*. The prefix *choreo* refers to the practical mode, which examines the multiplicity of diverse simultaneous movements that form conditions in which the artistic practice, and human body, takes (a) place. I have adopted this understanding from dance researcher Susan Leigh Foster's inquiry on the notion of choreography and the development of various notation systems:

The word "choreography" derives from two Greek words, *choreia*, the synthesis

of dance, rhythm and vocal harmony manifest in the Greek chorus; and graph, the act of writing. The first uses of the term, however, are intertwined with two other Greek roots, *orches*, that place between the stage and the audience where the chorus performed, and *chora*, a more general notion of space, sometimes used in reference to a countryside or region. Where *choreia* describes a process of integrating movement, rhythm, and voice, both *orches* and *chora* name places ... Although we cannot know what motivated each of the authors to name their treatises as they did, the proliferation of titles, all referencing the same project, signals a complex relationship between process and place, a relationship that was then translated into a written document. Choreography thus began its life as the act of reconciling movement, place, and printed symbol. (Foster, 2011, pp. 16–17)

It is important to note that in my practice there is no written text first. Instead, in my practice the text or printed symbols are translated into surrounding material conditions. This is an umbrella term for me, in which the notions of place, space, and movement are intertwined. In my understanding this complexity can be understood also as a kinesthetic field (Parviainen, 2006, pp. 26–39), which the body inhabits. In practice, the complexity of these relations is multiplied by a moving body in motional circumstances, meaning that the notions of place and space are dynamic entities instead of stable containers for human movement. In practice, the prefix *choreo* refers to the mode of examination of these complex conditions. In other words, the prefix *choreo* refers to a practical mode, which does not aim to produce stabilized forms or patterns. Instead, it is kind of orientation of the body, a multifocal sensitivity and openness towards the distribution of movement, which is constantly assembling, dispersing and re-assembling. *Choreo* operates as an orientation in this plural motional matrix and with a chosen attribute, for example *graphing*. As bodily practice it becomes an action that leaves a trace from the examination of the continuously de- and reforming field with the sensitivity of *choreo*. I use the term sensitivity to describe the bodily state which ‘*choreo*’ requires, but which it also generates. In practice, tuning into this mode of sensitivity is a process in which certain questions are exposed in order to enter and tune into the choreo–mode as bodily practice. This includes, for example, questioning the straight gaze, which takes over material objects towards the queering gaze, which couples, activates and scans spaces between objects.

THE ATTRIBUTE *STRUCTION*

Once my understanding and practice of choreography as a linearly unfolding construction in which dance is realized collapsed few years ago, I was confused. The work became meaningless. It seemed that this kind of understanding was insufficient to meet my curiosity and interest towards the notion of choreography. During the doctoral process I have built another kind of understanding of choreography, namely one which could respond to this journal’s open call through articulating choreography as performative and open-ended practice, which leaves traces and generates artistic works. My process can also be understood as a continuation of the examination of the notion of expanded choreography, which emerged strongly approximately 10 years ago. One

▸ of the main building blocks in this process has been the notion of ‘struction’ by Nancy. Nancy and Barrau introduce this notion as follows:

The uncoordinated simultaneity of things or beings, the contingency of their belonging together, the dispersion of profusions of aspects, species, forces, forms, tensions, and intentions (instincts, drives, inclinations, and momentums). In this profusion, no order is valued more than the others: they all – instincts, responses, irritabilities, connectivities, equilibriums, catalyses, metabolisms – seem destined to collide or dissolve into one another or to be confused with one another. Whereas the paradigm had been architectural, and consequently architectonic in a more metaphysical way, it then became more structural – a composition, surely, an assembling, but without constructive finality – and finally structional, meaning relative to an assembling that is labile, disordered, aggregated, or amalgamated rather than conjoined, reunited, paired with, or associated. (Nancy & Barrau, 2015, p.49)

After concluding my doctoral research project in 2019, I am still pondering why this quote struck me so strongly when I came to read Nancy’s essay *Of Struction* a couple of years ago. One reason might be that the choreo-orientated practice that I am developing is not based on pre-planned linearly unfolding structure as I described in the beginning. Nancy’s essay helps me to deepen awareness about how choreoreading operates as a way to explore how different perceived motions seem to collide or dissolve into one another, or how things are disordered or ordered without the understanding of choreography being a construction. It also helps me to go beyond understanding choreography as practice that orders. The practice becomes more like an inquiry to the following question: How are the relations of diverse things labile and amalgamated more than conjoined? The *choreographic* emerges from the examination of that amalgamation. It becomes itself a practice that aggregates and dissolves rather than reunites, pairs or conjoins, if I try to describe it with Nancy’s vocabulary. In other words, choreography can be the result of simultaneously centripetal and centrifugal practice, which collects and lets movements go, and which critically continuously re-establishes and re-distributes the body’s relation to the motional surroundings. In practice, the body simultaneously gathers motional information and dissolves while doing that. The body becomes an organism, which cannot keep up or support *a construction*. In other words, the body does not operate as an architectonic support for choreography to unfold, but as an atmospheric organism, which is in constant porous modification while inhabiting the labile assembling. The body not only conjoins or pairs things, it also couples itself with moving relations, which form various affective spaces within the circumstances in which the body takes (a) place. This coupling happens without superimposing or inscribing a pre-planned construction or writing; instead, it becomes a question of how to perform perceived and processed non-random disordered movements, which saturate the body in the selective choreoreading process. This also includes the question of how to work with movements that challenge the immediate perception and experience. ▸

▶ TOWARDS CHOREOREADING

In my doctoral research project, the prefix *choreo* is examined with the attribute 'reading', and which as bodily practice called choreoreading, does not aim to produce fixed repetitive patterns accomplished by the human body, but more contextual and situational gestures and signs, which emerge from processing the vast motional information with the mode of embodied reading. However, as writing and reading are intertwined bodily actions, choreoreading produces potential for writing based on awareness which the choreo-orientation as a bodily perspective towards the surrounding circumstances generates.

The movement which is at stake here refers to movements that extend beyond the human scale and which challenge the direct immediate perception and experience. I am working with movements which form the conditions for the choreographic to emerge. In my understanding, this includes the rotation of the planet Earth around its axis and its orbit around the Sun, or the movement of the tectonic plates under my feet. These movements constitute the movement realm which I inhabit as an artist. How does one embody the velocity that is present and produced by these movements? What about the movement of mountains forming or buildings decaying? To work with this kind of spatiotemporal scale of movements, during my doctoral research project I made an installation work called *Seasons as Choreographers: Where in the World is Astronaut Scott Kelly?* It was a one-year-long project that started in March 2015.

The project examined the choreographic sense and experience of different seasons, which meant processing and materializing the embodiment of how four Nordic seasons choreographed a choreographer. In the beginning of the project, I chose a route around the Theatre Academy in Helsinki, Finland, to be walked a few times a week in a calm manner. At the same time, on 27 March 2015, NASA-astronaut Scott Kelly was launched to the International Space Station as part of NASA's One Year Mission project. I followed Kelly's journey through his Twitter account while I was doing my project, and somehow the project became a pas-de-deux, in which I and Scott Kelly were performers in a choreography formed by the material transformation of the planet while orbiting the Sun. The movement parameters of the project were as follows: Scott Kelly was orbiting Earth approximately 12 times every 24 hours; planet Earth is rotating at approximately 1 670 km/h; and Earth is orbiting the Sun at approximately 107 200 km/h. To set one more layer on this rotation grid, I studied how our galaxy moves. I took the scientific data as a movement that conducted my body, and which exceeded my lifetime and spatial understanding. These movements I could not directly perceive, but still through the seasons I had access to the movement of the planet's orbit around the Sun.

▷ DISTRIBUTION OF MOVEMENT AND CHOREOGRAPHIC THINKING

In my understanding, choreography is an independent artistic discipline and it can be materialized with many different mediums. In order to build understanding about this mode of practice, the strong historical link between dance and choreography needs to be opened and uncoupled (see, for example, the conference description of expanded choreography in MACBA 2012¹) and turned towards movement and motion as a realm in which the choreo-orientated practice operates. By this, I simply mean that I leave out the questions “What can be called dance?”, “What is dance?” or “What is post-dance?” and examine how movement as a broad phenomenon operates as one constituent of my choreo-orientated practice. The operative potential of the notion of ‘expanded choreography’ can be criticized, because the broad understanding of choreography is often already a starting point for artists. The uncoupling and opening does not mean to deny the history of the relation between dance and choreography. When re-thinking the ecology of the choreographic practice, many of my artistic references come from the broad history of site-specific dance works such as Anna Halprin’s *Planetary Dance* project from the 1980s, but at the same time from the history of place-responsive visual art works such as *Mile of String* (1942) by Marcel Duchamp, which expose and make visible the relations between space, place, context, bodies and their material surroundings. Coming from this perspective, choreographic thinking and practice can be shared with many artistic disciplines as a way of critically processing the perception and experience of movement and examining and re-routing the experience and perception of the shared world from that perspective. It can function as a broad mode of art making, which examines the distribution of movement and motional relations in various scales whatever the traditionally understood discipline might be. In short, movement is a broad phenomenon, which realizes and materializes the life-world, and for me choreographic thinking, practice and art making operate as a way of examining human place within the complex interplanetary, socio-material, and cultural movement mesh on the planet Earth.

SLOW CHOREOGRAPHY

This process has caused already some shifts; for example, how I enter and work with the performance place has changed. It is already occupied by various movements instead of being a container for my practice, movement, and body. The conceptual and practical shift from space and time to space, time, and movement as a condition in which the artistic process, body and work takes place has also slowed down the artistic process. It has been necessary to sensitize the body differently to the material circumstance compared to my earlier practice, in which the performance place, for example a black-box theatre, functioned as a container for the choreographic work. It has become a choreographic agent that sets conditions for my movements, like any other place. This perspective connects my practice to the history of site-specific and context responsive art, with my interest in extending the notion of site and place towards outer space. ▷

1. <https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/34425/expanded-choreography/>

▶ Thus, one of the questions that I continue to discuss in the framework of choreography is how choreographic thinking and practice can be understood as a way to couple with and make sense of the labile motional world in which the body takes (a) place. This exploration continues to critically reflect also on the ecology of that history of choreography in which the choreographer has been understood as a dance-master standing in the center of the space and being someone who composes movement by mastering it. In my work, this has meant critically re-examining my previous practice as a choreographer, in which I understood movement as a material that the choreographer molds and sets in movement-phrases in various compositional forms on stage, where I was working with the tradition of making repeatable dance pieces as an author who writes movements and composes them as closed *phrases*. Once this kind of artistic aim and professionalism in the production-based frameworks where I worked in the field of contemporary dance lost its significance, I needed to seek other kinds of traditions from the history of choreography and contemporary art.

As bodily practice, choreoreading is a reciprocal process with the motional circumstances in which the artwork takes place, which deals with choreo-*graphic* im/potentials by examining the movements that form the kinesthetic and material circumstances at hand. Choreoreading produces embodied, experienced translation of the movements which surround and move my human body. This translation manifests itself in the gestures that the body performs while being engaged with choreoreading practice. Thus, the choreo-*graphic* emerges as performative through this practice. The emerging graphic is not a result of realizing preplanned linear construction, but an embodied situational inquiry, which is multifocal and non-linear, and in which lived circumstances, cognitive analysis nourished by reading theories, and experienced and perceived movement operate simultaneously. The moving body is not a vessel which carries a choreographic map. Instead, the body becomes an atmospheric organism, which, through inhabiting motional surrounding and kinesthetic fields, materializes choreo-orientated sensitivity and a way of making sense of the world, while making the world by inhabiting it. One of the first concrete experiments through which this mode of thinking has developed in the body of my artworks is a work called #CHARP_ solo (*Liminal Space Opera*). ▶

▶ AN ASTROEMBODIED CHOREOSTRUCTION: #CHARP_SOLO
(LIMINAL SPACE OPERA)

FIGURE 1

#CHARP_solo (Liminal Space Opera)_1. Photographer: Vincent Roumagnac



#CHARP_solo (*Liminal Space Opera*) is a solo version of the choreographic work #CHARP, which was premiered at the Research Pavilion in the context of the Venice Biennale in 2017. The title is an acronym from the words *choreography as reading practice*, and the attribute in parenthesis is a result of developing the piece. After the group work in the Research Pavilion in 2017, I have continued performing the solo version, last time in the contemporary art space Kutomo in Turku (Finland) in February 2019 as part of the *Ehkä*-production program. The work exposes choreoreading practice as performance. While developing this piece, I let go of the idea of a beginning and an end as temporal markers for the artistic performed piece, but usually I respond to the scheduled environment in which the work takes place; meaning that, for example, in Kutomo I agreed to perform 40 minutes in a double-bill evening. Even if the title manifests the work as a solo, my collaborator, French artist Vincent Roumagnac, also performs in the work as stage manager. He responds to the performance by visualizing the place by playing with his installation in which my performing body takes place. Thus, there are various place-specific dimensions and movements active simultaneously in the *piece apparatus* itself.

In Kutomo the work took place in a dance-studio, which has a wooden floor and a couple of columns in the space, and the audience was seated at both ends of the studio. In the beginning, when the audience was arriving at the studio, I was sitting on the floor, wearing a golden helmet, a skin-colored unitard and black-golden scuba-diving socks, and starting to work with the patterns on the floor with the manifold temporal traces of ▶

the branches on the boards, visually like small orbital galaxies. The studio's vertical and horizontal lines, shapes and curves created a particular rhythmic architecture in which the body took place. In the beginning, the touch of the wood, the pull of gravity, awareness of the velocity of the orbit, and slight push from the floor formed the elements for the dynamic choreographic relations which the body inhabited. This agglomeration was saturated by awareness of the dynamics in the audience, the materiality of the walls of the studio and the speed of the colorful light penetrating the space of the installation in which I was. In the work, the kinesthetic field unfolds quite fast as complex, multiplied, and layered with multidirectional forces and movements with which I continuously negotiate and examine through the embodied choreoreading. In the working state I did not aim to stay with any specific movement theme or motif for a long time, and I did not aim for linear sequencing of the movements, but to stay with the mode of making brief and quick responsive gestures to the dense, perceived, processed, and experienced surrounding movement-mesh. This mode allowed me to select and jump rapidly from one movement register to another, from the attempt to embody the orbit to the particular detail of the floor, or to my relation with planetary movements, or to link all these relations together and work with a formed, simultaneous, plural field all at once. In this process, the idea of making composition turns towards selective attention and being attentive towards the phenomenon of movement, or the question of where the composition happens in the embodied process is just simply in a very different place than in my earlier works in which movement operated as a material for making repeatable composition. So, this small conceptual and practical shift has formed the following questions at stake as well: how is attention directed to some directions and layers of movement? How does this rapid change of attention compose the body? How to practice and sensitize attention towards the movements that challenge the immediate perception? In performing 45 minutes I sometimes needed to close my eyes to take a short break, or to disengage from the intense experimenting and practice and adopt a looser relation to the question of how everything moves, as this is an exhausting practice.

The exploration mode is made explicit when I work with the thin long metal rod, which is part of the installation. At one point of the work in Kutomo, I started to experiment with the studio space with the rod, using it first as a tool to mark the studio space and take control over it in various ways, and then moving on to experiment with the rod in another way. In short, the rod turns from the technology with which I take control over the surroundings to a piece of material with which my body engages in various ways. I am interested in what happens to the relationship between the body and the tool when the scale of the relationship changes from geocentric measuring and place-taking towards interplanetary scale and movement, in which that kind of technological tool can no longer operate. The re-positioning which happens in this process is kind of a speculative choreo-orientated crash-test of this relationship between a technological tool and the body having and using it. In one way, the work exposes a failed astronaut whose place-responsive spacewalk in the studio turns into an ontological examination of the human place in the particular beyond-human motional conditions.

Figure 2

#CHARP_solo (Liminal Space Opera)_2. Photographer: Vincent Roumagnac



The main task in the performance is to experiment with the sense of movement, movement-experience, place, space, context, and choreo-orientated thinking understood as processing these notions in a reciprocal manner. What kind of a body does this motional material surrounding generate? How to inhabit this particular condition? How to take (a) place here if everything moves? How does the body make this place? In other words, the solo-work portrays the process of coupling into the movements that move my body. Extending the notions of movement and place beyond a human scale redirects my attention towards the choreo-orientated practice and bodily process in which the choreographic proposal emerges. 'Astroembodied' is a term which refers to these starting points. This exploration continues currently in the series of the works that I call *Astrotrilogy*.

CHOREO-ENDING

My solo process can be seen as an exploration and continuation of that history in which destabilization of the hierarchy between choreographer, movement, body and place constitute the matrix of the choreo-orientated practice. The movements towards choreoreading practice also include working with the contextualization of the so-called raw material of the piece. In that process choreoreading involves examination of the relations between context and situation through the questions *How does a chosen cultural context operate as a choreographic apparatus?* and *How can a context be chosen?*. These questions in the end bring together choreoreading as exposed place- and context-responsive bodily practice, which searches out ways to materialize artworks that I have named choreostructions.

- ▶ Using #CHARP_solo (*Liminal Space Opera*) as an artistic example of the starting point for the examination of the notion of struction and choreoreading, let me now return to the exercise with which I began this article. Please feel free to join me and finish the reading of this article with this little experiment:

I stand up and take a few steps again in some direction calmly. Once I stop, I pay attention to the arrival, and when I have the sense that I have arrived, I say "I am now here". I repeat once again. I take a moment and pay attention to how 'here' is moving. What are the movements that constitute this place? Do those movements extend beyond a human lifetime? What about their spatial scale? How is this 'here' orbiting the sun? How is the tectonic plate under my feet moving? How would I embody the velocity which is present? How is the building in which I am decaying? How would I describe the 'here' which is formed by the relation of this place's orbit around the sun and the decaying of this building? What kind of a place or kinesthetic field is opened for the body to inhabit? What kind of a body does this field produce?

If everything moves, how do I take (a) place here?

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