

Karolina Bieszczad-Roley

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INTUITION AS A METHODOLOGY – REFLECTIONS ON MY PHD RESEARCH PROCESS

Abstract: This paper presentation is a reflection on my PhD research completed in February 2010. It focuses on the role of intuition as an important aspect of decision making in the research design, process and methodology. An American academic Valerie J. Janesick (2000) emphasises the significance of describing the researcher’s ‘moments of knowing’ in an academic qualitative research. She claims: “If we take time to carve out some space to understand the place of intuition (...) in our work (...) we present a more complete, holistic, and authentic study of our own role as storyteller and artist scientist”.

Whilst a written thesis is a platform to ultimately tell a story, the organisation and narrative of the thesis do not necessarily correspond with the course of the research process. This paper presentation reflects on my journey of discovery of the posture of a Butoh dance photographer, elucidating particular intuitive turning points in my investigation.

This paper presentation is a reflection on my PhD research completed in February 2010. It focuses on the role of intuition as an important aspect of decision making in the research design, process and methodology. Whilst a written thesis is a platform to ultimately tell a story, the organisation and narrative of the thesis do not necessarily correspond with the course of the research process. This paper presentation reflects on my journey of discovery of the posture of a Butoh dance photographer, elucidating particular intuitive turning points in my investigation. It proposes that researchers should be awake to intuitive inclinations as they may serve as a valuable source of knowledge in decision-making processes.

Studies of intuition have received attention in academic research in many disciplines. Claire Petitmengin, a French scholar and researcher investigates intuition in a neuro-phenomenological research on the anticipation of epileptic seizures, Jane Mathison,

an English scholar specialising in neuro-linguistic programming looks at the intuition in a context of transformative learning or Trisha Greenhalgh, an English GP and professor at University College London explores the use of intuition in medical field. In many humanities and scientific fields intuition is beginning to be now recognised as an important part of decision-making processes. Academics try to understand the place of intuition in our work and how it manifests itself in a research.

An American scholar Valerie J. Janesick (2000) states that it is also beneficial to explore intuition in an academic context as part of qualitative methodology. In her paper she emphasises the significance of describing the researcher's 'moments of knowing' as she claims:

If we take time to carve out some space to understand the place of intuition (...) in our work (...) we present a more complete, holistic, and authentic study of our own role as storyteller and artist scientist (Janesick 2000).

This paper reflects on my own process of conducting a PhD research and is presented here as an example of reflecting on one's intuition during an academic research. For the purpose of this paper I define intuition as an immediate apprehension or cognition. Following Petitmengin's study, I understand the intuition in opposition to analytical and deductive model of decision-making, but as a mode of cognition, a "moment of knowing" anchored in the body (Petitmengin 1996, p 9).

Not every type of research is likely to involve intuitive knowing with the same intensity and some may not need the application of intuition at all. There are different research designs which start, for example, with hypothesis to prove, with identifying new problems or finding solution to new problems. It may be a qualitative or quantitative research, or a combination of those two and the intuition helping to discover, interpret and develop knowledge may appear in different stages of the research and in different ways.

My PhD research emerged from my Masters studies in Poland (completed in 2004) and my professional background. I studied theatre at Jagiellonian University, Poland and spent a sabbatical year in Australia where I was introduced to the Japanese dance form known as Butoh. Having previously studied mainly 'classical' theatre, Butoh

seemed fresh and new, and was an intellectual challenge. After returning to Poland I focused my research on this dance form and wrote a thesis entitled “Faces of Butoh: the anthropological search for the source of Butoh dance diversity”, dedicated towards the cultural influences of the form of Butoh (Bieszczad 2004, unpublished).

Following Lee Chee Keng’s words that “Butoh is an art that is understood primarily through practice” (Keng 1998, p 2), I took Butoh workshops, mainly with Daisuke Yoshimoto, in order to experience the dance myself. I was disappointed to discover that I felt uncomfortable dancing Butoh, which led me to conclude that the body is not my medium of expression. However, just watching Butoh dancers was not enough and I had a strong urge to “do something” with the form. Photography became my choice and, as the Butoh photographer Lot described her need for photographing the dance (Lot 2005), I too became hungry to capture images of Butoh dancers. I started by photographing performances and then moved on to independent photography projects, where I would choose a location and ask dancers to improvise for the camera. This kind of “practice” was more than just being in the audience at a theatre and resulted in my engagement in the creation in a different way than when I danced. I began asking myself a series of phenomenological, performative and artistic questions about my involvement in Butoh while photographing it? My PhD thesis addressed this question, which emerged intuitively from my own photographic practice and was challenged and strengthened by the testimonies of other Butoh photographers who claimed to be involved in photographing Butoh in a unique way. As such, my doctoral research searched for an explanation of the artistic practice I was experientially involved in. As Suzan Kozel pointed out:

Writing from lived experience often amounts to writing without a clear methodological mandate, or demands the courage to assert that the methods are fluid and subjective. Paradigms are scraped together (defiantly, guilefully, playfully, intuitively) from philosophy, literature, the social sciences, physics. This bricolage or hybridization is done in part to find a voice in the academy, but more important, to help the writer herself understand what it is that she is experiencing and to communicate these experiences (Kozel 2007, p 9).

My first ‘moment of knowing’ in my PhD research took place during a workshop

with MA students at Brunel University. My second supervisor Gretchen Schiller introduced me to the group of students as a “photographer”. I immediately objected to that although I did not have a clear explanation as to why I was not a photographer even though I did photograph dancers. Instead I said that I was not a photographer, I **did** photography. I could not give at that point full details describing how this differs from ‘just’ being a photographer but it indicated for me some very important aspect of my approach to a research problem. After reflecting on this spontaneous and intuitive use of expression ‘to do photography’ I understood the significance of looking at my practice as an embodied action in its independence from the photographic images. My thesis shifted the locus of attention from photographs considered as the final artistic object towards the act of photographing itself and from a photographer looked upon solely as a ‘producer’ of photographs to an ‘artist in action’. It allowed me to focus on the act of photographing as a unique artistic practice, which possessed performative qualities.

In order to place this practice in a performing arts context, I researched on different dance and theatre practices, which would help me to understand and explain how ‘doing Butoh photography’ is performative. I turned to Butoh itself and to Polish 20th century physical theatre even though, again, I was not fully able to reason these choices. I was not aware of the immediate steps that led me to choose those performance practices, but the pieces of jigsaw were revealed to me in a later stage of my research, in an explicitation interview. This interview method, also called guided introspection, was developed by a French scholar Pierre Vermersch (1994). It allows untrained subjects to describe unconscious cognitive processes taking place during a singular experience and become aware of those whilst reporting them to a facilitator/mediator (an interviewer). An interviewer constructs carefully targeted questions to allow an interviewee to access their consciousness. The questions aim to be free from preconceptions and encourage the interviewee to direct their attention towards their own experience. The interviewee describes the conscious appearance of his experience by developing his own descriptive categories, which are not predetermined by the interviewer. Therefore, the explicitation interview explores the sensory level of conscious experience, in opposition to the more abstract dimension

represented by verbalised, languaged experience, which is dominated by interpretations and explanations.

I asked dr. Jane Mathison who was trained in explicitation interview, to conduct a session with me which would explore different levels of my consciousness when pressing the button of a camera during photographing Butoh dancers. I was hoping to better understand the aspects of my 'doing photography' which I was not conscious of and hence could not reflect on. When I entered Jane's office and she asked whether I was a dancer, I immediately replied that I was not because the body is not my medium and that is why I 'only' photograph the dance. However, during my sessions, the body has been identified (through the use of NLP) as a dominant element. Jane Mathison noted the extent to which I used the phrase 'I feel'. She followed this cue and prompted with questions regarding my bodily awareness. She was checking to see if what I was describing was processing or making sense of something through the body.

This approach was very surprising to me since it revealed that my practice was strongly rooted in my body. The intuitive choice of performative context for my research clarified itself for me with a detailed description of the use of the body in Butoh photographing. I could then present the posture of a Butoh photographer in a structured and narrative way. I argued in my thesis that the photographer's embodied experience constitutes an 'inner' performance which, similarly to Butoh dance, manifests itself not only in physically apparent (visually perceived) movements but also within the multi-modal pre-reflective consciousness of the reciprocal interaction between the photographer and a Butoh dancer. Examining the photographer's perception mediated by the use of a camera and the pre-reflective dimension of a moment when he presses the button of a camera allowed describing this decisive moment as a non-analytical and intuitive cognition anchored in the photographer's body.

Those two moments, first when I intuitively defined my practice as 'doing photography' rather than 'being a photographer' and second when I understood through the explicitation interview my intuitive context of bodily practices within performing arts, were the most significant turning points in my research, which contributed to my findings. First type of intuition was a sudden insight which when reflected on, revealed something new to my research approach. The second type of

intuition was longer in time and constituted of several months of researching the notion of embodiment within performing arts. Only the use of guided introspection allowed understanding the meaning of this context to my research.

I am aware that not all intuitions are possible to be traced and explained and often it poses a certain level of frustration for researchers who **believe** in their findings or approach and yet cannot academically defend them. It may also put researchers in unease to give rational explanation of their proceedings – to use Marcel Duchamp's metaphor, being in a deep forest they intuitively know that there is a clearing very close and yet they are not able to immediately find a way out. The intuitive moments have to be reflected on and presented in a structured and narrative way in the academia for the study to gain integrity, credibility and validity. I argue, however, that the use of intuition as a method in academic research is not unscientific and it greatly contributes to decision-making processes in academic research. As Trisha Greenhalgh wrote:

Reflecting retrospectively on the process of (...) intuition (...) is a powerful educational tool. In particular, critical reflection on past intuitive judgments highlights areas of ambiguity in complex decision-making, sharpens perceptual awareness, exposes the role of emotions in driving 'hunches' (...), identifies specific educational needs, and may serve to 'kick-start' a more analytical chain of thought on particular problems (Greenhalgh 2002).

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