

CHORA

Moving Space

One of the most significant tendencies in contemporary art is the urge to work in-between installation and performance. Many artists explore and expand the boundaries of objects, stillness and exhibition settings on the one hand, and subjects, movement and stage sets on the other. By doing so they question and challenge the respective ways of being an audience: walking freely through the space or sitting still in front of an action developing in time. Relating with the own individual body – approaching an object, walking into an installation, strolling through an environment of things; or being seated in a designated area, surrounded by other people and watching one or many actors, dancers etc. perform in front of a collective audience.

Implicitly or explicitly, consciously or intuitively artists like Anne Imhof, Cecile B. Evans, Goshka Macuga, Philipp Gehmacher, Reza Mirabi, Moran Sanderovich – to name just a few who are very different in their aesthetics, approaches and intentions and also in their backgrounds –

work in an area where objects of the exhibition space and subjects of the performance stage meet, engage with each other, affect each other, assimilate; where the role of the audience becomes unclear, multiple and fluid – spectator, visitor, participant, witness, individually walking around and/or being in a crowd: all of that, maybe even at the same time. Questions of gaze, how to look (back), what to do, how to be part of what is going on, appear – on the side of the performers and makers as well as on the side of the audience. Very often in these works the action of the performance is spatialized and happening everywhere at the same time and/or the objects are somehow alive, moving, performing themselves (think of any kind of robots or remotely controlled devices etc.). Very often the question of who is doing „it“ (whatever „it“ is) and if it is done for someone (an audience) or if it is somehow more object-like „self-sufficiently here“ remains open. The ways in which subjects/performers relate to an audience, address it, and the way objects are simply here, merge, blend, cross-fade.

Performance has always been related to a certain time frame – the duration of a piece, of an action that is being performed and watched; installation art has always been related to a certain understanding of space: the set-up makes you move but doesn't move itself.

If, to put it shortly, performance has always been related to the presence of time and installation art to the presence of space, time being action and movement whereas space means stillness, I would claim that the most significant tendency in contemporary art consists in working on these very conditions: the materiality, perceptions and sensations of time and space themselves. I think that many of the works usually referred to as transdisciplinary art and called a cross-over of genres etc. are not just simply a mix of strategies or media while the overall frame would stay the same. There is a transformation going on that is deeper and more substantial. It has to do with a

spatialization of time-based movements and a different understanding of space. An understanding of space that doesn't take it as a container but as environment, as moving relations, as temporal in-betweens of all sorts between various entities – living bodies, mobile and immobile objects, images, sounds etc. Out of this different understanding and for the arts more importantly: perception of space something new is emerging on the level of singular art works as well as on the level of genres. In-between or beyond performance and installation art something is coming up, maybe a kind of „third genre“. I think it has to do with choreography as the art of movement in and of space and with a potentially new practical and theoretical understanding of it.

I will try to describe what I mean and I will do so from my own artistic perspective as someone working on the relation of time and space. My thoughts are related to the piece **Chora** I have been working on together with my artistic partner, visual artist and choreographer Moritz Majce and 12 performers. A documentation can be found here: <https://www.moritzmajcesandraman.com/chora/>

Growing Time

„This is all there is: Bodies that move, bodies in no explicit form of interaction, bodies in space and time. Bodies that give form to space and time; involving me, while I am sitting there: attracting the gaze, holding it, redirecting it, absorbing all the senses, affects, and thoughts into the new space and time that unfolds here. ›Chora‹ is, we might say, nothing else than a landscape of figural effects and of movements; a landscape where sensation and imagination converge in blissful play; a landscape of beauty.“

Niklaus Largier

Our piece **Chora** is named after the ancient Greek mythological name *chora* designating that out of which everything emerges. We started working on **Chora** quite some time ago – the idea for it dating back to 2016 – and we presented a first stage of it in November 2019 in Berlin. (A next one was planned for April 2020 in Vienna, but was postponed due to Corona to April 2021). In studio 14 of Uferstudios we set up a video, audio and text installation and a live performance by 12 dancers. We performed there for five consecutive days, each day with longer opening hours.

Time is central in **Chora**. We dedicate the work to questions and experiences of growth. From many different angles we dive into various streams of growing. We intentionally expose ourselves to a period – the growing – that is usually over when a work is presented, when it is finished. In **Chora** we explicitly set a frame that allows us to stay open to time, to be affected by time, to let time come to us. All that is happening in **Chora**, every text, movement, image, object, sound etc. is somehow related to dimensions of growth. First, as content: we take as inspiration growing processes from the level of cells, bodies, groups, flocks, herds, up to whole geological entities such as landscapes; we are particularly interested in zones where artificial and natural growth intertwine; one of these zones is in Lausitz, and we went there to shoot a series of choreographic videos. Lausitz is an area in former Eastern Germany and that is deeply shaped by many decades of coal mining. As Germany is trying to exit coal mining, now many of these areas are being „re-naturalized“. This creates a completely artificial landscape: every plant there has been planted by men and there is no single fish in the lake that is too acid for them. Nevertheless it is nature that you see and also feel when you go there and there are for example rare birds living there as they are comparably undisturbed; and the wolves are coming back to this area as well. It is a strange artificial, peaceful wilderness. It was



originally planned as a future tourist spot, but there is no one going. You rather feel like having landed on the moon. It gives you an idea of the earth as a planet, a foreign planet. Take Lausitz as a good example, maybe even as a symbol, for what I am interested in with art: the wild, maybe even archaic dimension of what could be called with Jean-Luc Nancy and Susanna Lindberg a „technonature“. Take the organic in its ambiguity of tool (organon), form and force of transformation. And take the landscape as shared space of heterogenous elements, as ensemble of different kinds of movement, including that of humans strolling through it.

It is landscape as ensemble of timings, rhythms, different kinds of growing, moving, of being both, time and space, that we are interested in and working with in the piece **Chora**. Comparable to the

artificial landscape in Lausitz everything in **Chora** is planted –and everything is specifically made for it. We put everything together, and then we let it grow; we let it be and become itself within the ensemble of others. This process of each thing becoming itself within the ensemble of others by together forming and transforming a landscape is the core, the score of **Chora**.

In its first presentation in November 2019 in Berlin **Chora** took place over 5 days. It happened for 1 hour on the first day, for 2 on the second, 4 on the third, 8 on the fourth and 16 hours on the fifth. During these exponentially growing opening times everything in the space became more: there were more objects coming in, more videos, more texts, the space became more and more crowded and according to the opening times the performers performed more and more hours. All together **Chora** developed as a growing landscape of many heterogenous elements all coming together with their own drives and desires and needs of growth. Over the course of five days the space filled up, and time became longer, it expanded.

Our interest in this set-up was to find ways through this „more“, ways to be, to move and to be moved in this „ever more“. We – performers, us, the makers and in the end also the audience – were exposing ourselves to being together with things, sounds, images, objects, texts – „others“ of various kinds – in an ever changing space; ever changing on the level of the individual elements as well as on the overall. **Chora** was a space transforming itself by getting more and more dense and at the same time ever longer, more and more stretched in time. We wanted to enter the ambivalence or at least simultaneity of filling up the space and extending the time of being together. We wanted to know, to experience how this set-up affects the way we perform, how this shifting and also confusing space-time-movement makes us move – each of the performers and them

together. And we wanted to find out what ways of watching, being in it, inhabiting it, returning to it, etc., what kinds of audience beings **Chora** would create.

By setting up a space like this we were opening up to contingency. In **Chora** it remains open how and where and what will connect in an audience member's experience. Someone might make sense of what they are reading and the sounds they are listening to; someone else will connect a video and a performer's movement; another visitor might focus on the performers first and switch to the videos later, taking them maybe as an extension of the live performance, leading into another time and space. There will never be an overall story and no overall guideline. Some visitors would come only for once, others would return and link what they see now to what they already saw, creating their own archive. We as makers could not know more than the visitors. There were many entrances and infinite relations and every audience experience happened to be unique although all of them took place in the same space.

Receiving movement

„It's a lack of light without a lack of trust; the performers have no fear for the unknown. By immersing themselves in unpredictability and accepting instability, they embrace the darkness that began in the deep creases of the womb.“

Beatrix Joyce

Chora is taking the infinity implied in the ever growing relations between the elements and the ever growing duration as a source. We wanted to find out how to move in it and be moved by it – on the side of the audience as well as on that of the performers.

Together with the 12 performers we were working on somatic and affective relations. We trained being connected one to another and at the same time being open to an outside – to the space and its objects, sounds and images and also to the audience members. Being connected, being open is referring to senses: to listening, looking, perceiving with skin, back, all sensitive zones, the whole nervous system. The first and most relevant movement of this choreography consists in opening up, deeply opening up all senses and all receptive zones. The performers enter a shared state, a state of hyper-openness and hyper-presence as hyper-relatedness. This state of increased sensitivity and receptivity is nothing else than an intensification of what is already here. It intensifies seeing, listening, feeling as being outside, being in the relation with others. The intensified seeing, feeling, listening, in short: the receiving does not come before a movement but it is or becomes movement itself. Activity and passivity are turned into letting pass through, becoming permeable and thus being moved not by production but by reception. The intensification of what is here already is the source of movement and the movement of the source. What the dancers let through their bodies – what they let themselves sense – are relations, a being with, a Mit-Sein to use an expression by Nancy; the dancers are a being in-between something and/or somebody, spatial and affective connections. By receiving-moving they do not form anything in order to shape it, they do not follow a pre-given form, they constantly transform. Their movement is embodied time floating in space, stretching, expanding, thickening, releasing the space, thus giving it back to time. If it works, if the sensorium, the reception is really open, it is a constant and continuous space-time shifting, it is the opening of time in space and space in time, a movement in-between. And it is this movement in and of time-space-relations that I think comes close to what the ancient mythological *chora* designates.

The ancient Greek name *chora* is at the same time very concrete and a very enigmatic mythological concept, mainly known to us through Plato's *Timaeus* and its famous contemporary interpretations by Derrida, Irigaray, Kristeva and others. It is interesting, though, that next to the philosophical history of the word still today the main village on every Greek island is called Chora. It is the name of a specific place, the place where everything and everyone comes together and that usually also connects the islands across the sea (the ports). Chora is the place that lets the connections happen and appear.

In Plato's *Timaeus* there is a more general and enigmatic level of *chora* being the space of connection and transformation: *Chora* is described as the space of movement as such that lets everything else – the elements and their movements – emerge; it does so by not having any shape itself and by being permanently moving; in *Timaeus* it is said that *chora* is a space which is never still and never in balance; it is shaking. *Timaeus* also links this mythological precosmic shaking of *chora* to the human body, its health and its desire to move (in order to keep the elements in healthy relations). Similar to chaos and yet very different in its temperature, rhythm and tone, *chora* makes us think of a moving space, a space of and in movement, a space very different from a static container but also from abyss, crack, chasm that for example chaos as the other famous mythological opening is related to.

Almost on the contrary to chaos, *chora* seems to be referring totally to connection, stream, nurturing as constant transformation. Long passages in *Timaeus* describe how *chora* shakes and stirs everything even on a pre-elementary level out of which the elements only emerge. The emphasis on emergence and constant transformation is even more obvious in the famous personification *Timaeus* finds for *chora* when he calls her the „wet nurse of becoming“. A wet nurse is

in any sense all about connection and it could hardly be in a more bodily, sensual sense: breast, milk, stream, touch, mouth, sucking, nurturing, growth – a current of life itself. It also reminds of Hera and her milk that forms the galaxy, the milky way (Hera was a wet nurse herself: while breast-feeding Heracles, one of Zeus' illegitimate sons, she pushed the kid away from her breast and the milk sprayed out all over the heavens, creating the milky way - the galaxy, still containing the greek word for motherly milk).

Chora as the wet nurse of becoming, nurturing growth, transformation. *Chora* as the name of a receptive space in constant movement giving space to movement. *Chora* is a mythological name – dating from before classic Greek philosophy and also from before classic Greek theater –, charged with archaic and ritualistic dimensions. In its relation to *choros* – another pre-theatrical name and practice, referring to the choir, the dancing group and the dance floor – *chora* allows us to think of dancing and singing or speaking in resonance with and as resonance of the space of movement as such. It gives us an idea of movement as giving in, enjoying the elementary imbalance that is passing through, shaking, swinging and nourishing every body, every particle and making it move and dance.

Chora opens up a potential to think of movement and choreography as its artistic form as an ever transforming encounter of time and space, receiving and echoing in every movement the reception of movement and the movement of reception. *Chora* allows for an understanding of a space that moves us – in us, through us. A space that flows, connects and transforms. I think, having the images of Lausitz in mind, that in many ways today we are called to think and practice not only how to move in, to, through spaces but to think and practice how we are moved by spaces, spaces in constant artificial and natural transformation.

Chora, the mythological concept as it is mentioned in Plato's *Timaeus* is the name for a space in movement, a connection between time

and space. It is the opening movement of and for movement itself and as the wet nurse of becoming *chora* is a sensual, gentle and caring image for any kind (species) of movement, of time-space-relation. From here on, I think it would be possible to draw a new picture of what choreography as notion and practice is and could be; how – in a very special and spatial understanding – it could be and somehow already is the third kind beyond or in-between time, action, stage oriented performance and space, object, stillness and exhibition oriented installation art.

Chora, both, the specific project I was describing and the mythological dimension envelops the bodies and allows them at the same time to stretch out, to grow, to share space, to move – streams beyond shapes. Swimming in a liquid, a fluid, a current – milk. A space which is itself movement in every element and every relation of which it consists. Before/beyond active and passive *chora* is space in transformation and transformation of space. I would call choreography the art of being its resonance, its intensification. Choreography as creating echos of transformations we are and we are in. Of letting feel the ever surprising moves and shakes of that which is constantly transforming, of that which is never in balance.

A choreography inspired by *chora* would not only go beyond the time-oriented performance and the space-related installation; taking movement as transformation before and beyond activity and stillness *chora* can be a shared space of and in heterogenous movements. This comes close to ideas and images of an environment. The reason for reviving *chora* though is that in its ancient and mythological dimension it is offering not only an image of a space in movement. In *chora* the very contemporary perception of space as no longer still and stable, of ongoing streams, circuits, circulations is linked to another, maybe more vertical dimension in time. Through the name

chora the contemporary and futuristic perception of space in motion, of a world and a planet in fundamental transformation is historically, etymologically, philologically and philosophically linked to the peripheries – pre-philosophy, pre-theatre – to the deep times of Western thought and art. *Chora*, the name, is a channel to the ancient, the mythological and even archaic and to their symbolic and affective potentials. And in a maybe strange way it seems very right and coherent that today in the most futuristic conceptions of space the most archaic image of transformation re-appears just as the most natural and the most artificial meet in a place like Lausitz.