

## Secondhand Knowledge

By Rósa Ómarsdóttir

Where do ideas come from, where do they originate from and how is that knowledge shared? These questions have been asked for centuries. Mark Twain once wrote that “all ideas are secondhand, consciously and unconsciously drawn from a million outside sources, and used daily by the garnerer with a pride and satisfaction born of the superstition that he originated them”. Perhaps all ideas are secondhand, and how does that translate to knowledge in general? Is there such a thing as first- or secondhand knowledge? These questions were the spark of a research project on dance which I started in 2016 and conducted in the form of interviews and workshops around different places in Europe.

We most often speak of secondhand knowledge as the type of knowledge we do not have direct insight into. It is mediated knowledge and does not derive directly from the source. It is perhaps best described like the game of Chinese Whispers, where a word gets transformed in passing, ending up very different from the original source. Secondhand knowledge has kind of bad reputation, it is considered *second* to the *first*-hand knowledge, information can get lost in translation and it can lead to misinterpretation. This notion of secondhand knowledge was in many ways familiar to me, especially when it comes to the live medium of performance and dance. I come from Iceland, a small and isolated place in the middle of the Atlantic ocean. When I was living there, I didn't see much international work live, only short clips on youtube and pictures in books. Icelanders have sometimes been accused of having only secondhand knowledge. Perhaps it is also true up to a certain extent. The Icelandic dance scene is quite young, dancing was for a long time forbidden, people were few and lived spread. The isolation, poverty and intermitted natural disasters resulted in a nation that at the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century could be described as in a cultural arrested development. However, even though foreign influences for long time did not easily reach Iceland, I want to believe that does not diminish it's value when it comes to art. Maybe there are even benefits to secondhand knowledge. The Icelandic musician Björk explained that very well when she was asked about the music scene in Iceland on the *Late Night with Conan O'Brian* show. She answered the following: “Oh it's a lot of sort of isolated people who actually know how to control and operate electricity, but uhm, (...) they are kind of isolated and they kind of sneak in and listen to American radio and they kind of like, get sort of what's going on in Europe as well, and then they kind of misunderstand it in a kind of beautiful way”. I think she summarises very well, with a bit of irony towards the popular belief that Iceland is still quite

underdeveloped, how Icelanders relate to the *outside* and how playful they allow themselves to be with the information they gain. A new creation is already happening there in the transmission itself – through misunderstanding in a very beautiful way.

There has been a tendency in discourse and writing about dance history to think of it as one linear timeline, and this line is often very Western/Euro-centric. Therefore places that don't fall under this one-narrative, are often accused to be *lagging behind* or of having *only* secondhand knowledge. The question of where ideas and knowledge come from is not only philosophical but also a very political, and brings to light hierarchies of control over knowledge production. But as Mark Twain wrote, perhaps it is only superstition that an idea or knowledge has originated within one person. The utopian idea of a verified and objective firsthand knowledge can perhaps also be debunked – well at least when it comes to societal knowledge and artistic ideas. We always have some way of interpreting and understanding influence in a way that is related to one's own personal context and maybe, in the end, all we are left with is secondhand knowledge.

The international dance scene is filled with different knowledge and experiences of dance which have not all been given the same weight in the collective history. I have been researching this topic together with artists in different places around Europe. Now I want to extend this project outside of Europe to challenge further the Western/Euro-centric canon of knowledge and history and conduct this research in other continents. I believe that this project will be very relevant outside Europe. It will likely take few twists and turns, hopefully it will surprise me and challenge me, and I look forward to coming across even more questions as I go along with it.