Choreographic ethics

Introduction

Toward a Choreographic Ethics of Unfinished Recognition

This text begins with a question: what if choreography is not a form of control or expression, but a speculative act of recognition—a gesture of offering oneself to others whose ways of sensing and knowing may remain unknowable? Rooted in my experiences performing for very young audiences and shaped by readings in anarchist theory and philosophy, this inquiry unfolds across the intersections of dance, ethics, and relation.

Rather than defining choreography through clarity, authorship, or mastery, I propose a shift toward choreography as a mode of being-with: an embodied practice that values presence over performance, sincerity over coherence, and hospitality over comprehension. Drawing from Emma Bigé's anarchist reading of postmodern dance and conversations with Catherine Malabou on form and plasticity, I trace a vision of choreography that does not govern meaning, but risks exposure in its absence.

This is a choreography that does not demand recognition, but dwells in misrecognition; that does not aim to be understood, but offers itself anyway. It is not choreography as display, but as companionship—a non-totalizing address to babies, objects, systems, and others whose responses may never confirm we were felt at all.

Through this lens, choreography becomes an ethics: a way of attending to asymmetry without resolving it, of reaching toward difference without mastering it. What follows is both a meditation and a proposal—a call for a choreographic culture where the political, the perceptual, and the relational remain unfinished, and where to move is to be available, not for meaning, but for encounter.

To ground this vision in practice, I also turn to decentralized thought in anarchist organizing, borrowing from Cindy Milstein's Anarchism and Its Aspirations and Peter Gelderloos' Anarchy Works. Their reflections on horizontality, mutual aid, and the practical complexities of non-hierarchical structures enrich the ongoing question: how might choreography itself function anarchically—not just in theme, but in form, structure, and practice? By tracing these connections, the text proposes not only a speculative ethics, but also the

seeds of a practice: choreography as a decentralizing force, a lived refusal of governance, and a shared process of becoming-with.

Choreography as a Speculative Act of Recognition

Toward an Ethics of Being-With

Choreography is often defined as the arrangement of movement in space and time--something authored, repeatable, and expressive. It is usually judged by how clearly it communicates, how skillfully it organizes, how beautifully it performs. But what if choreography could be something else? Not a form of control or expression, but a gesture of appeal--a reaching toward others who may not respond, understand, or even remember?
This shift becomes possible when we consider consciousness as something that might exist without reportability or memory, as suggested by Annaka Harris and others. What if choreography was not about making meaning for a knowing audience, but about becoming legible to others whose ways of sensing and knowing exceed our own--infants, objects, systems, atmospheres?

From Communication to Legibility
This reframing proposes:

- Choreography not as what we say, but how we allow ourselves to be perceived.
- A practice of presence, sincerity, and vulnerability--addressing others who may never confirm our gesture.
- Not choreography for the other, but with the other, in acknowledgment of their unknowability.

An Ethics of Being-With

In this light, choreography becomes an ethical act. It is a way of being-with across asymmetries: between adults and babies, humans and nonhumans, speakers and non-speakers, perceivable and imperceivable forms of life.

Adults, for example, often act as validators for babies--documenting, remembering, and narrating their lives. But this also overlays and reshapes those lives. What if choreography refused that overlay? What if it did not seek to narrate or explain, but instead allowed co-presence, attention, and mutual sensing to unfold--without demanding comprehension?

Documentation as a Second Choreography

We also document choreography: to prove it existed, to extend its life. But every documentation is also a choreography--an echo, a distortion, a translation. Rather than deny this, we can embrace the layeredness of choreographic traces. Not as failures of fidelity, but as companion gestures in the ongoing experiment of being perceived.

Choreography Beyond the Human

This approach invites us to choreograph with:

- the baby whose gaze never fixes,
- the stone that resists movement,
- the algorithm that does not care,
- the fog, the grain of the floor, the temperature of the room.

Here, choreography becomes a speculative ethics of recognition--a mode of address to the unknowable, the non-reporting, the unresponsive. It asks:

- What does it mean to move for something that cannot confirm our presence?
- What kind of gesture allows us to be felt without being understood?

A Call for a Different Choreographic Culture
This is a call for:

- An expanded choreographic ethics, where movement is not about mastery but about hospitality.
- A shift from choreography as display to choreography as appeal.
- New values: attunement, sincerity, co-presence, and failure--over clarity, control, or legibility.

Choreography, in this view, is not just how we move, but how we risk being known--by beings and systems whose ways of knowing we may never access.
It is not choreography as expression, but as offering.
Not what we show, but how we let ourselves be felt.

Speculative Recognition in Human-to-Human Dance

Tracing an Ethics of Being-With in Choreographic Practice

The idea of choreography as a speculative act of recognition--of reaching toward something or someone whose world we cannot fully know--has long existed, quietly, in the space between humans. Even among adults,

choreography often moves beyond representation or expression, becoming a form of attunement, sincerity, and risk.

The Duet as a Space of Being-With

The duet offers a simple but profound example. Rather than a rehearsal of shared steps or pre-fixed meanings, it can become a space of mutual sensing--a place where bodies listen before they speak, where contact is felt before it is understood. In such work, choreography is not about executing form but staying with form as it unfolds. It becomes a way of holding space for another, even when their inner world is opaque.
This is not choreography as mastery, but as relational presence.

Dwelling in Misrecognition

There are dances that do not ask to be understood, but simply to be witnessed. These works resist clarity, resist being reduced to meaning, and yet they remain deeply sincere. They ask us to stay--even when we don't know what we're seeing. In doing so, they model an ethics of attention that doesn't extract or define, but that allows space for the other to remain other.
To choreograph in this way is to dwell inside partial recognition, and still offer yourself.

Choreography as Offering

Some choreographies are less about saying something and more about being available to be sensed. These works treat movement not as message, but as offering. They are open forms--forms of hospitality--inviting an encounter that may or may not arrive. This kind of choreography is not about impressing or proving, but about becoming feelable.
The risk is that no one might feel it. But still, the offer is made.

Not Knowing, Still Moving

At its heart, this approach to choreography accepts that we cannot always know what others see, feel, or remember. And still we move. We reach toward presence without guarantees. We tune to others not to mirror them, but to allow our difference to be sensed as sincere.
This is not choreography as explanation, but as companionship.

As an anarchist I continue with the question is this dance anarchism.

Between Anarchy and Recognition:

On Emma Bigé and Choreography as a Speculative Act

Emma Bigé's article "Danser l'Anarchie: théories et pratiques anarchistes dans le Judson Dance Theater, Grand Union et le Contact Improvisation" proposes a critical re-reading of postmodern dance histories through the lens of anarchist thought. Rather than framing the Judson-era experiments in terms of democracy, Bigé argues that their true radicality lies in their anarchic tendencies: their refusal of hierarchy, ownership, and fixed authorship; their experiments in collective composition; and their insistence on improvisation as a mode of political and relational inquiry.

Bigé identifies three choreographic modes that each enact a distinct form of anarchism:

- The anti-institutional anarchism of Judson Dance Theater, grounded in the refusal of aesthetic norms, star systems, and centralized authority.
- The improvisational anarchism of Grand Union, where composition unfolds live and power is constantly redistributed.
- The mutualist anarchism of Contact Improvisation, where physical weight-sharing becomes an ethics of care, reciprocity, and attentiveness.

These modes do not demand comprehension or dominance, but instead cultivate presence, responsiveness, and the capacity to be moved by another. In this way, Bigé's analysis resonates deeply with the idea of choreography as a speculative act of recognition.

Both approaches reject choreography as control or representation, and instead imagine it as a means of becoming available to the other--not to be decoded or interpreted, but to be felt. Bigé describes Contact Improvisation as a dance of "tact," where touch becomes a way of listening, and where mutual support emerges not through instruction, but through attunement. This corresponds directly to a speculative ethics of choreography: the choreography that risks being misunderstood, that does not demand recognition, but offers itself anyway.

Bigé's work supports the idea that choreography can function beyond communication--as an act of non-coercive co-presence, a gesture across asymmetries, and a practice of sustained relational attention. Whether between dancers, or between beings whose worlds may not overlap (infants, objects, systems), both Bigé's anarchist lens and the speculative act of recognition

invite us to consider choreography not as a transmission of meaning, but as a fragile offering of being-with.

Together, these perspectives call for a choreographic culture where ethics precedes aesthetics, and where relation takes precedence over resolution.

I continue further with anarchism.

Choreography, Anarchism, and the Refusal to Govern Meaning

Following Catherine Malabou

In an ongoing conversation with philosopher Catherine Malabou, I have been trying to think more precisely about how anarchism manifests in dance--not merely in its themes or aesthetics, but in its very operations. Emma Bigé's article Danser l'Anarchie has been central in this reflection. Bigé powerfully reframes postmodern dance practices not through the often-invoked language of democracy, but through anarchist modes of being-together: the anti-institutionalism of Judson Dance Theater, the improvisational elasticity of Grand Union, and the mutualist ethics of Contact Improvisation. Each proposes a choreography that is not imposed from above but unfolds through the interaction of bodies in shared time and space.

In my own work, particularly when performing for very young audiences or facilitating experimental scores, I am struck by how dance reveals itself not through clarity or intention but through a continual negotiation of presence. This resonates with Bigé's framing of anarchism not as chaos or absence of form, but as the refusal of imposed governance--a refusal that allows for the emergence of relation, risk, and responsiveness.

I've described this in terms of a "could be anything" quality in dance: a sense of openness that is not undisciplined, but deeply attuned. It is not the absence of structure that makes it anarchic, but the fact that structure is never sovereign. In this light, choreography becomes a speculative act of recognition--a reaching toward the other (human or nonhuman, normative or non-normative) not to represent or govern them, but to offer oneself as perceivable, without demanding comprehension in return.

This expands the political significance of choreography. It suggests that what matters is not whether dance is improvised or set, but how it is lived: how it holds space for misrecognition, for difference, for non-sovereign relations. This is where I feel Malabou's concept of plasticity enters the frame: not just the

ability to be shaped, but the capacity to resist form, to break and reconfigure relation. Dance, in this sense, does not illustrate anarchism--it practices it.

What I learn from both Malabou and Bigé is that anarchism in dance is not about rejecting structure but about denaturalizing authorship. The meaning of a dance does not reside in its design, but in how it is negotiated, lived, and received. The dancer does not implement a choreographic idea; they become the site through which the idea is continually unsettled and reformed.

And so I return to this thought: choreography, at its most radical, is not a plan or a pattern, but a gesture that asks to be felt--by others who may never answer. It is an invitation, a non-totalizing address, a stance of perceptual humility. In this way, dance becomes not only anarchic in method but in ethics: not what we do, but how we agree to not govern meaning.

Ethics in Dance

Dancing ethics

In dance, as in all creative acts, ethics cannot be separated from the aesthetic and conceptual elements that make up a work. Choreography, in particular, is not simply a set of movements or formal compositions; it is a speculative act, a practice that imagines new ways of being, moving, and existing in the world. As such, the ethical responsibility of choreography is not just about reflecting or reproducing what already exists but about reimagining what could be—both in the movement vocabulary and in the relationships between performer, audience, and society at large.

This speculative nature of choreography is inherently ethical. By proposing new possibilities, choreography invites us to consider the implications of power, identity, and justice. Every movement, every structure within a dance, carries the weight of decisions—decisions that are not neutral but shaped by the socio-political contexts in which they are made. As such, a choreographer's responsibility is not only to create something aesthetically engaging but to engage with the ethical dimensions of that creation. A work cannot simply be beautiful; it must also interrogate the systems of power that underlie the movement, the roles, and the bodies involved.

Choreography as speculative practice challenges traditional hierarchies and normative structures. It invites risk, experimentation, and confrontation, and in doing so, it opens up new potentialities that are rooted in justice, inclusion, and care. This speculative act requires a commitment to ethical reflection, asking

not only “What does this work say?” but also “What structures does this work reproduce, and what systems does it resist?”

Furthermore, the ethical dimension of choreography is not just about representation or inclusion but about how the act of creating and performing choreography can be a site of resistance—resisting conventional notions of beauty, of success, of collaboration. The speculative act of choreography should not simply wait for external validation from oppressive systems. Instead, it must actively seek to create alternative spaces, offering new ways of being and interacting that challenge the status quo.

In this sense, the speculative nature of choreography is its ethics. It refuses to be complicit in perpetuating harm or injustice. Instead, it embraces the responsibility to imagine, to push boundaries, and to create new possibilities for how bodies, power, and community can interact. By focusing on the ethics of speculative choreography, we create a dance practice that is not merely an aesthetic object but an active force for change.

Practicing Choreography for alternative spaces.

Toward Decentralized Doing

If choreography, as this text proposes, is a speculative act of recognition—an offering of presence to others whose modes of sensing and knowing may never confirm receipt—then how might we do it? What practices allow this ethics of misrecognition, of non-sovereignty, of being-with to be practiced?

Here we borrow from decentralized political thought—not as metaphor, but as method. In Anarchism and Its Aspirations, Cindy Milstein reminds us that anarchism is not simply against authority; it is for collective life organized without domination. Similarly, Peter Gelderloos in Anarchy Works offers example after example of communities who live and make decisions together without centralized power—through consensus, mutual aid, and shared responsibility. These principles offer more than political structure; they describe a way of practicing choreography.

The Score as an Open Invitation

Instead of pre-set choreography, we might offer scores: invitations structured enough to support attention, but loose enough to allow emergence. These are not tools for control, but for attunement. Like anarchist assembly protocols,

they rely on mutual responsiveness rather than hierarchy. A score may ask: what do you notice when someone else changes direction? How can you follow the light in the room rather than the leader? These are not instructions; they are relational prompts.

This kind of choreography depends on a redistribution of agency. The choreographer does not govern from above but becomes a facilitator—a node among others. This echoes Milstein's vision of anarchism as "prefigurative": enacting in the present the kinds of relations we wish to see. The choreographic space becomes an experiment in shared time, in non-coercive togetherness.

Consensus in Motion

Decentralized choreography does not mean chaos. It means decisions made differently. Like anarchist consensus models, choreographic decisions can be slow, distributed, and rooted in shared noticing. A movement doesn't proceed because the choreographer says so; it emerges because enough bodies attune to its possibility.

In this way, choreographic practice resists the efficiency logics of neoliberal art-making. It values slowness, non-resolution, and multiple centers. It invites interruption. It tolerates the awkwardness of waiting until something is truly shared.

Infrastructure for Non-Mastery

In anarchist organizing, infrastructure matters: the food table, the childcare corner, the open stack for speaking. Similarly, choreography that refuses to govern meaning must build infrastructures that support non-mastery. This might mean:

- Accessible structures: not everyone has to do the same movement, but everyone must have a way to participate.
- Fluid roles: performers, observers, caregivers, and environment are in shifting relation, not fixed hierarchy.
- Permeable containers: spaces where people can come and go, rest or rejoin, without being cast as passive or disruptive.

These practicalities echo Gelderloos' emphasis on adaptability. There is no one way to organize a non-authoritarian dance space, but many experiments—each embedded in its own ecology.

Failure as a Relational Practice

This kind of choreography may “fail” to impress, to resolve, to represent. But failure, here, is a measure of sincerity—not inadequacy. The offer to be-with without domination will often be refused, ignored, or misinterpreted. That is part of the practice.

As Milstein writes, anarchism “doesn’t promise success; it promises the continual attempt to live freely.” In this spirit, choreography becomes a site not of mastery but of continual attempt: to reach toward others, to dwell in misrecognition, to build ephemeral communities of touch, of sound, of mutual sensing—even when nothing lands.

Conclusion

Toward an Ungovernable Practice

Before concluding, I want to clarify the central shift this text proposes. I have previously understood choreography through the lens of expanded choreography—as that which informs, that which organises action and experience beyond dance itself. While this remains useful, it lacks the ethical promise I now seek: an engagement with the anarchic potential of dance, its capacity to be with and beside others outside of command, domination, or even clear beginnings. This text calls for a choreography that does not merely structure, but relates; not just informs, but attends—responsibly, uncertainly, and with care.

What would it mean to take seriously the idea that choreography—when it loosens its grip on expression, authorship, and legibility—might offer not only an aesthetic alternative, but an ethical and political one? What if the radical potential of dance lies not only in what it shows, but in how it refuses to govern the experience of others?

Drawing on anarchist frameworks from Cindy Milstein and Peter Gelderloos, we begin to imagine choreography as a decentralized, mutualist practice—one that cultivates horizontal relations, embraces non-coercion, and resists the need for control. These political commitments do not remain at the level of metaphor. They shape the very practicalities of how dances are made: who decides, how decisions unfold, what kinds of authorship are distributed or relinquished, and how risk is collectively held.

An anarchic choreography does not aim to be universally understood. It is not built for consensus or clarity. Instead, it holds open a space for difference, opacity, and misrecognition. It reaches toward forms of life—babies, non-normative, nonhumans, emergent systems—that may never return the gesture. It is not a choreography of mastery, but of availability.

To choreograph in this way is to move as if the world is already relational, already entangled, already full of intelligences we may never comprehend. It is to act without guarantees, to offer without demand, to remain unfinished.

This, then, is a call not just for a new way of dancing, but for a different way of being-with: a mode of ethical speculation grounded in shared risk, mutual sensing, and the refusal to govern what anything must mean.