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# *Curating Dance : Decolonizing Dance*

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# Curating Dance : Decolonizing Dance

## Sigrid Gareis, Nicole Haitzinger and Jay Pather

*Curating Dance : Decolonizing Dance* is one of the first publications within an international context to deal with the curation of dance as a performative art as well as a sociocultural practice. This may come as a surprise, since in the first instance, the transfer of the notion of curation from the visual to the performing arts took place a while ago. In the second instance, dance as an art form that developed to include a more conceptual approach to choreography has found its way into museums, art associations, and biennials across the world since the 1990s. There is also an intense preoccupation with questions of somatic activism and body politics in the context of curating performative as well as visual arts. Furthermore, the decolonization of dance as both a thematic and infrastructural issue, together with the presentation of Artists of Color within and outside of Europe, has become increasingly central in organizational practice and program politics in recent years. However, the relevant theoretical and methodological foundations are yet to be substantively developed in the field of dance.

Therefore, the intentions behind *Curating Dance : Decolonizing Dance* are multifaceted. A central aim is to motivate and contribute to a still developing theoretical, conceptual, and practice-led reflection on curating dance with rigor. The publication also wants to provide other disciplines—and above all the visual arts—with a theoretical and methodical set of tools for dealing with this art form and its particular articulations. While the basis for our considerations is an expanded concept of curation, encompassing conceptual questions of presenting dance and performance, it also includes the (re)structuring of existing institutions in the field in a way that is appropriate and supportive not only to art and artists but also to society and its common public concerns and needs. In the focus *Decolonizing Dance*, for example, premises for curating in a global context are established and reflected upon. The concrete case study *Twists*—a failed attempt at decolonizing a European dance institution—encourages the necessary “hard work” of dismantling Eurocentrism and cultural hegemonies as a crucial step in contemporary curation. Advising against viewing decolonization as a trend, it advances ways of questioning the embedded notions of coloniality in institutions that impede the kind of curation that locates itself with depth in an increasingly precarious world.

While we assume that curating is not a profession that can be “learned,” as a sort of craft, the experiences of the Salzburg university course *Curating in the Performing Arts*—currently being carried out in cooperation with the Freie Universität Berlin and the Ruhr University of Bochum—show us the importance of acquiring knowledges of and reflecting on theory and methodology of curation in the performing arts. These programs and repertoires are becoming significantly more varied, topics relevant to civil society are being specifically addressed, the generation of knowledge through programming is intensifying, and existing infrastructures in the performing arts are being questioned through institutional critique—a concept and term that was still little known in the performing arts a decade ago.<sup>1</sup> The discourse on curating in the visual arts, which has already been going on since the 1960s, confirms this observation.

We are pleased that renowned representatives from theory and practice in dance and performance have accepted our invitation to this publication. Furthermore, we have included contributions from three former excellent participants of our course:

**Miriam Althammer, Gwendolin Lehnerer, and Amanda Piña.**

Conceptually, we have arranged the articles in a certain order, forming three larger chapters: (1) *Methods of Curating Dance*, (2) *Decolonizing Dance*, (3) *Mobile Institutions and Infrastructures*. After the introductory and methodologically oriented texts on seminal questions of the curator's positionality (**Sigrid Gareis**) and on relationality (**Nicole Haitzinger**) in the field of curating dance, three articles that expand and deepen the discussion of methods follow. **Gwendolin Lehnerer** deals with the key concept of transdisciplinarity in theory and practice with a specific focus on the complex relationship between visual arts and dance. **Gurur Ertem** argues in her article for curatorial activism in the context of dance; this kind of activism, in her opinion, increasingly takes place outside an institutional context to do justice to a present that is confronted with gender inequality, racism, ethnonationalism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia. Delving deeper into gender inequalities, **Kirsten Maar** focuses on feminist curating from the perspective of care politics. Concluding this section, **Michiel Vandavelde** reflects in an interview on the relationship between performative arts and curating from his perspective as an artist-curator in the so-called independent dance scene as well as a curator at the established art institution DE SINGEL in Antwerp.

The section on Decolonizing Dance considers curation and ideas of decoloniality from a variety of perspectives. It opens with **Rainy Demerson's** article, "Artistic Reparations: The Curious Curation of African Contemporary Dance," an investigation into some of the anomalies in the curation of contemporary dance from and about the African continent. The provocative use of "Reparations" in the title connects this critique of careless superficiality in such curation in European contexts to a broader, crucial imperative for redress. Examining a comprehensive attempt at a constellation of events that was intended to have addressed this, the case study of "Twists: Dance and Decoloniality" probes, through ideas of "dreaming", "missteps," and "ways forward," a project that would have fueled ideas around decoloniality and curation that sadly flailed and fell. This study features interviews with **Jay Pather, Choy Ka Fai, Sigrid Gareis, Lia Rodrigues, and Jessica Lauren Elizabeth Taylor**, the originators of *Twists*. **jacki job** and **Rolando Vázquez Melken's** conversation follows, turning the focus to a close and detailed look at that which lies at the center of dance curation—the relational body and the generative pedagogy that may inform its training within a decolonial context. Rounding up this section, **Amanda Piña's** article "Choreography as Curation, Curation as Cure" brings together the threads of this section—decolonial praxis, dance curation, the body, and the necessity for practices of healing.

In the third part of our publication, institutional and civically relevant aspects of curating in dance and performance are explored in depth. **Miriam Althammer** sketches a possible ecology of sustainable dance houses. **Ong Keng Sen** reflects on more-than-human and more-than-thing constellations in dance festivals and art exhibitions based on the idea of a "paratopic" communality. **Jörn Etzold** accentuates the shadows of the historical contours of dramaturgy in the German-speaking theatre context and sheds light on the potential for institutional critique today. Finally, **Kai van Eikels** argues for a model of collective curating—a model grounded in mobile infrastructures.

Although the three content-related chapters are recognizable in our proposed structure, the texts can be related to each other in many respects and form a dense and multi-layered fabric, which not least also bears witness to the intensive discourse and dialogue conducted over many years by the authors involved. Our special thanks go to our authors—the publication would not have been possible without their commitment, enthusiasm, and expertise!

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### Notes

**I** See Pirkko Husemann, “A Curator’s Reality Check: Conditions of Curating Performing Arts,” In *Cultures of the Curatorial*, eds. Beatrice von Bismarck, Jörn Schafaff, and Thomas Weski (Berlin: Sternberg Press 2012), 269–286; 279.

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# What Is a Curator in the Performing Arts?

## Sigrid Gareis

In Europe, the explicit discussion about the curator in the field of the performing arts began around the year 2000. But even before the job description could establish itself in this field, its reputation was already tarnished or even ruined. On the one hand, the hype surrounding the curator in the visual arts generally tended to be suspicious in view of the much more communally structured processes in the sphere of performing; on the other hand, the increased use of the term “curating” in the most diverse lifestyle areas was repellent. The appointment of Chris Dercon as artistic director of the Berlin Volksbühne in 2015 had a particular implication, leading to extremely defensive reactions from the traditional ensemble and repertory theater in the German-speaking world: there were fears that the Volksbühne would be converted into an “event booth”<sup>1</sup> (Claus Peymann) or into a permanent festival operation—in particular, there were warnings of a “globally widespread consensus culture with uniform presentation and sales patterns.”<sup>2</sup> Pejoratively, it was made clear that “Chris Dercon is not an artistic director [‘Intendant’], but a curator.”<sup>3</sup> Because of him, Christian Baron exaggerated in the newspaper *Neues Deutschland* that “the concerned theater citizen places the prestige of the curator’s job between mafia boss, animal food tester, and fortune cookie author.”<sup>4</sup>

In the performing field—and in this context especially for dance—it is therefore still necessary to clearly define the curator’s profession and to show its importance for the field.

### The Rise of Curation in the Performing Arts

Job titles for content-related, conceptual tasks and responsibilities in the performing arts are very diverse and by no means clearly formulated. In organizational charts or on business cards, in addition to curator, one finds a wide variety of designations, such as intendant, artistic director, festival or theater director, programmer, dramaturge, presenter, creative producer, or program director, which are often very difficult to distinguish from one another. Intendant, for example, signals an overall responsibility for a dance or theater institution (also a radio or television station), but the shared responsibility of the artistic director and the managing director may nevertheless be fixed at the contractual level. The profession of dramaturge, on the other hand, is historically limited to the German-speaking world and the so-called municipal theater with Schlegel and Lessing, and has only been able to gain a foothold in the independent dance and theater sector since the 1980s with protagonists such as Marianne van Kerkhoven or Tom Stromberg. However, it has not yet established itself on a global level—in dance even less than in theatre.

The adoption of the concept of curator from the visual arts was viewed rather skeptically by an older generation of organizers in the independent dance and theater scene, because at the beginning of the internationalization of the European theatre landscape in the 1980s, the central emphasis—strongly proclaimed by the international magazine *Theaterschrift*—was on the artist’s personality and her or his autonomous work.<sup>5</sup> When thematically oriented programs became more common in the 1990s, artists such as

Jérôme Bel—comparable to the visual arts decades earlier—refused to be integrated into them.

It was the younger colleagues in the field, now trained in dance and theatre studies, who began to question working methods and the prevailing “hands-on mentality” of the founding generation of independent dance and theater in Europe. These younger colleagues were the first to claim the concept of curator for themselves.<sup>6</sup> At about the same time, projects such as Hortensia Völkers’ stage parcours *Wahlverwandtschaften* (1999), Hannah Hurtzig’s *Mobile Academy* (1999), or Deufert & Plischke’s *B-Visible* (2002) began to establish a focus on the “format” of curatorial processes in dance and performance. The first university curation courses in the field of the live arts were launched in 2011 at Wesleyan University and in 2017 at the University of Salzburg. Other university departments such as DAS theater at the Amsterdam University of the Arts established a special focus on curation in their curriculum.

### **Curator Versus Presenter/Programmer Versus Dramaturge**

In the literature on curating in the performing arts, which is still quite limited,<sup>7</sup> the distinction between the methods of the curator and the presenter/programmer have been analyzed in an insightful way<sup>8</sup>: the presenter/programmer is defined as the type of organizer who, on the basis of personally accumulated knowledge and experience as well as her or his own taste, puts together artistic programs as a compilation of autonomous forms of artistic expression in festivals or houses and conveys these to an audience under the best possible organizational, PR-related, and technical conditions. S/he is mainly found in the older generation, at so called audience-oriented or bigger festivals in the theater, dance, and music theater sector, such as in Avignon, Edinburgh, or Montpellier. The curator, on the other hand, actively and creatively shapes the framing of the presentation and production of artistic works or discourses by creating thematic links, focuses, and condensations, developing independent presentation formats or deliberately initiating a community experience that goes beyond the individual performance. Especially in dance, curating is often brought into an analogy with choreographing and as a constellation/composition of space, objects, and bodies.<sup>9</sup> As a type, s/he can be found especially in the experimental field as well as in discourse- and genre-oriented festivals that were especially founded during the festival boom from the end of the 1980s in Europe—triggered by the fall of the Iron Curtain. The term is also frequently used for freelance program-makers in the field of dance and performance. The transitions between the two types are fluid.

The curator in the performing arts is particularly difficult to distinguish from the dramaturge, who in traditional ensemble and repertoire theater has the primary task of accompanying individual productions in terms of content, helping to design a seasonal program, writing program texts, and shortening dramas or libretti. However, since the traditional theater system—here, in particular, the so-called municipal theaters in the German-speaking region—is increasingly integrating festivals and discussion events into their schedules, the dramaturge is more and more involved in conceptual design there as well. Jörn Etzold is especially focusing on the dramaturge in German-speaking theater in this publication.

In principle—so the thesis goes—one could replace the term curator in the performing arts with that of event dramaturge, but the restricted regional spread of this profession (and partly also the curricula of the corresponding training courses) stands in the way. Therefore, it is no wonder that the term curator is more common especially in the United States and Canada than in German-speaking and other European countries.<sup>10</sup>



### Basic Conditions of Curating Dance and Performance

More recently, museums are increasingly programming dance and performance, and individual publications in the live art field are already beginning to blur divisional distinctions in curatorial research.<sup>11</sup> Nevertheless, even today, different basic requirements must be observed in the individual art disciplines, which have a lasting influence on curatorial action—especially in comparison to the visual arts. At this point, this can only be outlined schematically<sup>12</sup>: dance and theatre are art forms that are usually produced and performed collectively, creating greater obligations and dependencies amongst each other. The technical requirements are many a time enormous and often of very substantial importance for artistic creation. Also, the means of production, at least as far as Europe is concerned, are in the majority in public hands, since dance and theater are for the most part produced in co-production with publicly funded venue structures. On the one hand, this already structurally curbs the hype surrounding the curator, but on the other hand, criticism of the institution is also undermined. In very few cases can the artist live from her or his ephemeral “works” alone, which are often only shown for a few years (or even just once). On an international level, non-European artists are often existentially dependent on institutions of their former colonial masters. There are no collectors, auctions, or fairs, and there is no market for documentation of performances, as there is in the visual arts context. The “time factor” plays a much more decisive role for curating dance, theater, and performance, since, for example, in festivals lasting several weeks, it can hardly be assumed that everything in an overall program will be received by everyone. In-depth documentation and reflection on the curatorial process, the related knowledge production in catalogues or accompanying books is not (yet) a tradition in this field—a fact that massively restricts discourse and criticality in curatorial action in the performing arts. In a fundamental way, as could be seen in my own curatorial work in the museum,<sup>13</sup> the institutions of dance and theater are centered on people in their structure and organization, whereas the museum focuses on the object.



Lecture of Nikita Dhawan, group curation of *Curating in the Performing Arts* university course, 2017 at SZENE Salzburg. Photograph by Hubert Auer.

### Why Shift the Focus to the Curator?

But why is it sensible to shift the focus in the performing arts from the presenter/programmer to the curator in the future? The question of power arises here. Designing programs always means making a selection, i.e., making inclusions and exclusions. If this is primarily based on the experience and taste of a single person, not only is transparency eliminated, but the corresponding decisions can only be made discursive and critical to a limited extent. And besides the consequences for the affected artists' lives, especially in the young field of dance, this can lead to individual taste determining and shaping the development of dance in an entire region. Collective curatorial decisions—with a clear and transparent structure of responsibility—would remedy this and at the same time promote diversity and democratization in the decision-making processes. With the establishment of management teams, a certain rethinking can already be noticed at present, for example, in Zurich (Schauspielhaus Zürich, Theater Neumarkt, Gessnerallee) or Brussels (Kunstenfestivaldesarts, Kaaithheater). “Programmers” often argue with their wish or approach of wanting to be a “facilitator,” which can imply rather a lot of “paternalism” or “maternalism” if there is no transparency, (self-) reflection and explicit—open and public—discourse on methods and backgrounds. A conceptual-curatorial approach to programming creates the starting point for the well-founded and critical discussion that is so often lacking in the field of dance and theatre.

Times have also changed massively. A mere aestheticism, which is all too often attributed to ballet and dance, but also the self-referentiality of so-called concept dance, which was important at the time, can only be justified in programming to a limited extent in our times of war and crisis. In addition, general requests on organizers have become much more demanding due to the successive and necessary internationalization of the field beyond the European area, as shown in the part *Decolonizing Dance* of this publication for which Jay Pather is responsible. If the frequently and justifiably invoked role of art and culture for a more socially just development of society is to be taken seriously, this also means the dance sector has to relate itself to social processes much more than before.<sup>14</sup> This requires a determined stance and a clear articulation which not only the artist but also the organizer should adopt. The “hiding” of the presenter/programmer behind her or his personally made selection not only seems out of date but, in view of the crisis situation, also “cowardly” to a certain extent—stabilizing existing crises rather than counteracting them. Decolonial theory also shows us here the importance and necessity of positioning humans and knowledge<sup>15</sup>: Who is speaking and from what perspective and with what background? Only by making positionality transparent is it possible to assess and evaluate (and more easily change) the representational aspect that is always inherent in programming.

However, making the curatorial act visible is in no way intended to pave the way for the curator as a “hyped super-figure” in the performing arts. Rather, the social engagement and competence of all live arts should be used to develop specific (and new) forms of curatorship, in direct dialogue with the artists and the audience, that makes a responsible, socially more just as well as ecologically more sustainable future possible. In the best case, this may even be feasible.

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### Notes

**1** Original term in German: *Eventbude*. See the open letter to the Mayor of Berlin, Michael Müller, June 21, 2016, published in *Nachtkritik*, accessed November 11, 2022, <https://nachtkritik.de/images/stories/pdf/OffenerBriefPeymann210616.pdf>.

**2** Open letter from the employees of the Volksbühne, June 20, 2016, on the website of Volksbühne, accessed November 11, 2022, [https://volksbuehne.adk.de/deutsch/offener\\_brief/index.html](https://volksbuehne.adk.de/deutsch/offener_brief/index.html).

**3** Rüdiger Schaper, “Zukunft der Berliner Volksbühne: Wenn der Kurator kommt,” *Tagesspiegel*, March 26, 2015, <https://www.tagesspiegel.de/kultur/wenn-der-kurator-kommt-8148370.html>.

**4** Christian Baron, “Verdrängt vom Platz zwischen allen Stühlen,” *Neues Deutschland*, July 5, 2016, <https://www.nd-aktuell.de/artikel/1017593.verdraengt-vom-platz-zwischen-allen-stuehlen.html>.

**5** See the journal *Theaterschrift* (international editions from 1992 on) or Frie Leysen, “Searching for the Next Generation: Frie Leysen & the KunstenFESTIVAL,” interview by Daniel Mufson, 2002, published on his blog, accessed November 11, 2022, <https://danielmufson.com/interviews/searching-for-the-next-generation-frie-leysen-the-kunstenfestival/>.

**6** See Florian Malzacher, “Empty Stages, Crowded Flats: Performative Curation in the Performing Arts,” in *Scenekunsten og de unge*, eds. Sidsel Graffer, Adne Sekkelsten (Oslo: Vidarfolaget AS, 2014), 116–127, [https://www.academia.edu/10462640/Empty\\_Stages\\_Crowded\\_Flats\\_Performative\\_Curating\\_Performing\\_Arts](https://www.academia.edu/10462640/Empty_Stages_Crowded_Flats_Performative_Curating_Performing_Arts) as well as own experiences with the team of Tanzquartier Wien.

**7** More comprehensive compendia include the following: Florian Malzacher, Tea Tupavic, and Petra Zanki, eds., *Frakcija 55* (2010): Curating Performing Arts; Dena Davida, Jane Gabriels, Marc Pronovost, and Véronique Hudon, eds., *Curating Live Art: Critical Perspectives, Essays and Conversations in Theory and Practice* (NYC and London: Berghahn Books, 2018); Bertie Ferdman and Tom Sellar, eds., *Theatre 42*, no. 4 (2014): Performance Curation; Tom Sellar, ed., Sigrid Gareis, guest-ed., *Theatre 47*, no. 1 (2017): Curating Crisis.

**8** See, for example, Chris Dupuis, “Dance Curation As Chorographic Practice,” *Dance Articulated* 6, no. 1 (2020): CHOREOGRAPHY NOW: 89–110, <https://www.ntnu.no/ojs/index.php/ps/issue/view/338> or Malzacher, “Empty Stages, Crowded Flats,” 116–127.

**9** Gabriele Brandstetter, “Written on Water: Choreographies of the Curatorial,” in *Cultures of the Curatorial*, eds., Beatrice von Bismarck, Jörn Schaffaff, and Thomas Weski (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), 119–132.

**10** See Dupuis, “Dance Curation As Chorographic Practice”, 95.

**11** See, for example, Brandon Farnsworth, *Curating Contemporary Music Festivals: A New Perspective on Music’s Mediation* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2020).

**12** The contribution by Gwendolin Lehnerer in this publication explicitly addresses this aspect.

**13** Here, personal experiences during the co-curation of *Moments* at the ZKM/ Karlsruhe were particularly impressive. Catalogue: Sigrid Gareis, Georg Schöllhammer, and Peter Weibel, eds., *Moments: A History of Performance in 10 Acts* (Cologne: Walther König, 2013).

**14** Here, for example, a well-founded discussion of Nicolas Bourriaud’s *Relational Aesthetics* in the discussion on curating dance is still pending.

**15** See, for example, Rolando Vázquez Melken’s reflections on positionality: Rolando Vázquez, *Vistas of Modernity: Decolonial Aesthetics and the End of the Contemporary* (Amsterdam: Mondriaan Fund, 2020).

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# Curating Dance: *On est ensemble?* Expanded Choreography and Vulnerability

## Nicole Haitzinger

Curating in dance and the performing arts is a young field of research that (still) borrows definitions, theses, and insights primarily from the relevant theories on curating from the discursive context of the visual arts.<sup>1</sup> For the context of dance, there are a limited number of basic texts that are (still) increasingly formulated as singular positions.<sup>2</sup>

The formation of a discourse of its own with constructively opposing positions and crosscurrents is still largely lacking, and particularities on curating dance are little differentiated in theory. After an introductory definition of curatorial constellations, I would like to present two aspects with expanded choreography and vulnerability that, firstly, make specific constellations in curating dance visible—or, as Walter Benjamin put it more poetically, who furthermore sets up a similarity model between the starry world and dance, illuminate them<sup>3</sup>—and, secondly, have the potential not only to expand the curatorial by the performative and the genre of dance, but to think in a more body-centred, multi-sensory, and ethical way.

### Curatorial Constellations in the Performative Arts: Starting Point and Vanishing Line

The programmatic definitions of Beatrice von Bismarck, who already at the beginning of the noughties defined curating as a regulated field, as an action, and as a combinatorial practice in the sense of Nicolas Bourriaud's theses on relational aesthetics, were transdisciplinary trendsetters for the European art context.<sup>4</sup> In her recently published book *The Curatorial Condition* (2022), she expands the horizon of theorising in the cultural field of curating to include four relationally interrelated concepts: (1) *Curatoriality*, a term that attempts to capture its relational dynamics; (2) the aforementioned notion of *Constellation* with a focus on *Coming Together in Public*; (3) *Transposition*, *Moving in Entanglements*; and (4) *Hospitality, Ambivalences of Generosity*. By opening up the curatorial field beyond its own genre and art historical discipline into the practice and discourse of the visual arts, especially by accentuating the performative, the transdisciplinary, and the transmedial, coherent combinations of different artistic forms of articulation have become possible.<sup>5</sup>

Curatorial practice in the visual arts has increasingly adopted key concepts from theatre and dance since the zero years. Thus, Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, artistic director of dOCUMENTA (13), has sharpened her concept programmatically to the formula "Choreographies of the Curatorial" in the sense of an expanded choreography.<sup>6</sup>

In the more recent and transdisciplinary research on curating, two theoretical positions determine the discourse: on the one hand, differences and similarities between the visual and performing arts are balanced by the model-like comparison of the black box and the white cube<sup>7</sup>; in a broader sense, the theatre is being rediscovered in the visual arts as an assembly space and its community-building potential, which is now being transferred to contemporary exhibition contexts as a model.<sup>8</sup> Secondly, theorising in the field of contemporary performative arts focuses on curating the ephemeral and its political, cultural, and aesthetic implications.<sup>9</sup> In *The Curatorial Condition*, Beatrice

von Bismarck—exemplary for this current in the discourse—now increasingly accentuates the proximity to the performative arts of exhibitions through the aspect of temporality and ephemerality, even though the differences remain marked: “In comparison to other performing arts, the curatorial [in visual arts] typically accords greater importance to objects as agents, insofar as the exhibition format and medium is historically grounded in the presentation of art and artifacts.”<sup>10</sup>

Conversely, which aspects could be mentioned for curating dance as an artistic as well as socio-cultural form of articulation with a comparatively different genealogy, knowledge culture, institutional and infrastructural conditions, and reference systems?

Which peculiarities can be discursively and theoretically determined? In “Written on Water: Choreographies of the Curatorial” (2012), Gabriele Brandstetter raised the issue that remained partially in abeyance until the current discourse: “One can [...] pose the [...] question as to whether not only the concept of dance had been expanded to include the curatorial, but whether and how certain practices in dance and choreography transform, expand, and critically interrogate our understanding of the curatorial.”<sup>11</sup>

What potential could dance—subsequently asked—have for an expanded definition of the curatorial, and which aspects are of particular relevance?

### Expanded Choreography and Vulnerability

In the last ten years, a number of texts have appeared in theatre and dance studies that closely link a model of curating with an expanded concept of choreography.<sup>12</sup> The expanded choreography as an open and non-dichotomous concept of choreography has been discourse-determining in the context of so-called “contemporary” dance since the zero years.<sup>13</sup> The paradigm shift from an almost exclusively dance-related concept of choreography in the twentieth century to an expanded choreography as a genre-independent model was initially accompanied by a dismissive attitude towards dance as an art of movement in general: the spectrum ranged from William Forsythe’s much-quoted “choreography and dancing are two distinct and very different practices”<sup>14</sup> to Jérôme Bel’s “choreography is just a frame, a structure, a language where much more than dance is inscribed.”<sup>15</sup> These larger and smaller revolutionary gestures in the context of so-called conceptual dance not only turned the field of choreography upside down, but also enabled more diverse positionalities and relationalities in curating dance. Art and dance institutions in Europe programmed transmedial and collective artistic works such as Meg Stuart’s/Damaged Goods *Highway 101* at the beginning of the 2000s. In this exemplary expanded choreography, the audience explored different architectures by walking through rooms where performative and dance actions took place. The *Roadmovie with Stops* (Jeroen Peeters) thematises with spooky aesthetics the experience of a placeless existence with superimposed memories in actually uninhabitable spaces.<sup>16</sup> Furthermore, since the 1990s, literally unconventional formats have been curated in the context of dance, i.e., formats that explode all norms, logics, and conventions in the *dispositif* of dance; an example of this is the ten-day performance event *BDC/Thomas Plischke and Friends* (2001) in the Beursschouwburg in Brussels, which took place day and night without interruption and was conceived and experienced as a continuous performance with parallel artistic actions, workshops, lectures, films, and quiet zones. As Elke Van Campenhout points out in “Curating as Environmentalism,” in several respects it led the way for later formats in terms of “rethinking the performance art notions of curatorship and the role of the artist/curator, but also in the re-creation of the institution by introducing derogatory practises within its territory (another use of space, time, and the distinction between performers and audience members, and another way of thinking the social body of the participants of the environment created by (but not limited to) the programmed events).”<sup>17</sup> For my own profes-



Sound-Installation by Tomaž Simatović and Tomaž Tomljanović for group show co-curated by the students of the *Curating in the Performing Arts* university course, 2017, SZENE Salzburg. Photograph by: Hubert Auer.

sional socialisation, these two aforementioned artistic-curatorial forms of articulation in which I participated during my theatre studies were formative; indeed, they have significantly expanded my idea and horizon of what dance and curating in dance could be. This is put into words in the preamble to curating in dance in general: *On est ensemble* (we are together), be it in the expanded spatiality and temporality made tangible through curatorial and artistic interventions, be it in our singular as well as collective vulnerabilities. The “curatorial connectedness and relatedness” and “their potential of bringing-together and becoming public” accentuated by Beatrice von Bismarck is expressed—in comparison with the visual arts—in curating dance more body-related than object-related. The curated, temporary assembly of bodies in space, whether on stage or in public space, benefits from the experience of forming ensembles and thinking of bodies in the plural and has the potential to physically intervene in social and political spheres, as Florian Malzacher emphasises.<sup>18</sup>

At present, two trends can be observed: On the one hand, expanded choreography is defined as “non-centralised network of practices and ideas probing what *else* choreography may be”<sup>19</sup> and the other hand, the strict separation of choreography and dance made at the beginning of the zero years is put into perspective again. Partly responsible

for this “change of position” is the artistically and curatorially motivated balancing of other human-animal-thing relationships on stage and the recognition of different dance cultures and epistemologies demanded by decolonial thinking.

An expanded choreographic mode of the curatorial now increasingly connects with the visualisation and experience of vulnerable bodies beyond dichotomies (human-animal-object) on stage and in public space; bodies, in other words, that are principally and inescapably open, relationally connected and “exposed to the possibility of being attacked or harmed.”<sup>20</sup> The Covid-19 pandemic has drawn particular attention to a hidden dimension of the bodily relationship, and Judith Butler, as a trend-setting thinker on vulnerability, has formulated this pointedly: “This breath is mine but also not my own, always drawing from the air, which is filled with the exhalation of others.”<sup>21</sup> The experience of the vulnerability of bodies becomes a crucial aspect of curating dance, especially in a present marked by many instabilities, a present of (post-)pandemics, the actuality of wars, accelerating inflation, climate change, large movements of flight and protest, new interpretations of authoritarian statehood, more or less hidden racisms, imperialisms, and neo-colonialisms; see, for example, the Tashweeh Festival, the annual S\_P\_I\_T Queer Performance Festival Vienna, CHAKKARs, nadaLokal, or curated projects by Ivy Monteiro or River Lin. Two aspects of thinking about vulnerability seem to me to be crucial for future curatorial gestures in dance: firstly, the geo- and socio-politically unequal distribution of vulnerability,<sup>22</sup> and secondly, the fundamental relationality of corporeality: “We cannot understand bodily vulnerability outside this conception of its constitutive relations to other humans, inorganic conditions and vehicles for living.”<sup>23</sup> Enabling the presence of various vulnerabilities and their open process of recognition in the performative arts becomes a curatorial task in civil societies that are currently exposed to multiple threats. In this volume, Kirsten Maar, Gurur Ertem, and Jay Pather, as well as Miriam Althammer and Kai van Eikels, reflect on how this could be made possible, be it through feminist and queer curating, be it through political activism, decolonial practices, more sustainable dance houses, or collectively set-in-motion infrastructures.

### ***On est ensemble?***

Many aspects that currently still determine the discourse and practices of curating in dance were constellated in the 2000s. The choreographer, dancer, and author Raimund Hoghe, who died in 2021, for example, was already carefully and cautiously balancing the vulnerability of bodies on stage in his work in the 1990s, drawing on a model of expanded choreography.<sup>24</sup> Hoghe’s work has undoubtedly already become historical and is to be understood contextually, i.e., it is deeply interwoven with German history and his personal and artistic socialisation (among other things as a dancer with disabilities and as Pina Bausch’s dramaturge) in the twentieth century. And yet, his artistic works, with their ceremonial gestures, their kinaesthetic empathy, their depiction of the complex beauty of the world, their narratives and figures beyond dichotomies, their label-less queerness, and their modesty seem to address much that is currently being negotiated discursively and on stage. Highlighting the vulnerability of singular and plural bodies in the ensemble on stage was an important curatorial intervention in the zero years, when the genre and discipline in Europe were still increasingly exposed to the logic and aesthetics of virtuosity. Many European dance houses and festivals of the 2000s programmed these works, contextualised them discursively, and took up a pressing civil society-relevant question of their time.

During the Covid-19 pandemic, I suddenly, but not coincidentally, remembered Raimund Hoghe’s acting and breathing bodies and things on stage, unforgettable per-



performances that burned themselves into my memory and made me aware of my own vulnerability and at the same time the connectedness to a globally scattered but networked dance community, at a time when I was living in Paris in the strictest lockdown and was only allowed to go out of the house once a day for an hour within a radius of one kilometer. *On est ensemble*, literally: we are together. Or more dance and performance related: “We form an ensemble” again became my imaginary line of escape in a world that had become small and sharpened my theses on potentiality in curating dance, on expanded choreography and vulnerability as important aspects of the constellation presented here...

But are we really together?—What curatorial principles of inclusion and exclusion underlie the assemblies of bodies in the context of dance, and is the current presence of vulnerability on stages actually sustainable? The world as we knew it in the zero years no longer exists; it can no longer be spelled out in curatorial terms. In our present, threatened by divisions, we are confronted with other challenges; a present in which the question of the concrete constitution of “ensembles” in curating dance, decolonizing dance should be asked.

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## Notes

**1** Claire Bishop, “Black Box, White Cube, Public Space,” in *Out of the Body*, ed. Skulptur Projekte Münster (Münster: Skulptur Projekte Münster, 2016), [https://www.lwl.org/landesmuseum-download/SkulpturProjekte/Presse/Out%20of%20Body\\_DE.pdf](https://www.lwl.org/landesmuseum-download/SkulpturProjekte/Presse/Out%20of%20Body_DE.pdf); Beatrice von Bismarck, *The Curatorial Condition* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2022); Dorothea von Hantelmann, “Art Institutions as Ritual Spaces: A Brief Genealogy of Gatherings,” in *Theater, Garden, Bestiary: A Materialist History of Exhibitions*, eds. Tristan Garcia and Vincent Normand (Lausanne/Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2019), 251–259; Barbara Gronau, Matthias von Hartz, and Carolin Hochleichter, eds. *How to Frame: On the Threshold of Performing and Visual Arts* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2016).

**2** See Gabriele Brandstetter, “Written on Water: Choreographies of the Curatorial,” in *Cultures of the Curatorial*, eds. Beatrice von Bismarck, Jörn Schafaff, and Thomas Weski (Leipzig/Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012), 119–130; Maren Butte, Kirsten Maar, Fiona McGovern, Marie-France Rafael, and Jörn Schafaff, eds., *Assign & Arrange: Methodologies of Presentation in Art and Dance* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2014); Florian Malzacher and Joanna Waryza, eds., *Empty Stages, Crowded Flats: Performativity as Curatorial Strategy* (Berlin: Alexander Press, 2017).

**3** Walter Benjamin, “On the Mimetic Faculty,” in *Reflections*, trans. Edmund Jephcott (New York: Schocken Books, 1986), 333–336.

**4** Beatrice von Bismarck, “Kuratorisches Handeln,” in *Norm der Abweichung*, ed. Marion von Osten (Zurich; Vienna; New York: Edition Voldemeer, 2003), 81–89: 81.

**5** Maria Lind, ed., *Performing the Curatorial: Within and Beyond Art* (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012). See also Gwendolin Lehnerer’s contribution in this volume.

**6** Elisabeth Schambelan, “Talks with Curator Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev about Documenta 13,” *Artforum* (May 2012), <https://www.artforum.com/print/201205/talks-with-curator-carolyn-christov-bakargiev-about-documenta-13-30791>. See Carolyn Christov-Bakargiev, “The dance was very frenetic, lively, rattling, clanging, rolling, contorted, and lasted for a long time,” *DOCUMENTA (13), Catalog 1/3: The Book of Books* (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2012), <https://www.artforum.com/print/201205/talks-with-curator-carolyn-christov-bakargiev-about-documenta-13-30791>, 31–45.

**7** Bishop, “Black Box, White Cube, Public Space,” 2016.

**8** von Hantelmann, “Art Institutions as Ritual Spaces: A Brief Genealogy of Gatherings,” 251.

**9** Adrian Heathfield, “Final Report Summary—CTE (Curating the Ephemeral: Practices of Engagement and Display in Contemporary Art),” in *CORDIS*, 2017, accessed August 8, 2022, <https://cordis.europa.eu/project/id/329451/reporting/de>.

**10** Bismarck, “Curatorial Condition,” 18.

**11** Brandstetter, “Written on Water: Choreographies of the Curatorial,” 126.

**12** See Mathieu Copeland, “Choreographing Exhibitions: An Exhibition Happening Everywhere, at all Times, with and for Everyone,” in *Choreographing Exhibitions*, eds. Mathieu Copeland and Julie Pellegrin (Dijon: Les presses du réel, 2013), 19–24; Butte et al., *Assign & Arrange*.

**13** See Anna Leon, *Expanded Choreography—Choreographic Histories* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2022), 23.

**14** William Forsythe, “Choreographic Objects,” accessed October 6, 2022, <https://www.williamforsythe.com/essay.html>.

**15** Jérôme Bel, quoted in Una Bauer, “Jérôme Bel: An Interview,” *Performance Research* 13, no. 1 (2008): 42.

**16** See Meg Stuart, “On Highway 101,” *Damaged Goods*, 2004, accessed June 7, 2018, <https://www.damagedgoods.be/>.

**17** Elke Van Campenhout, “Curating as Environmentalism,” *bureau despoir*, November 16, 2013, <https://bureaundespoir.org/2013/11/16/curating-as-environmentalism-2011/>.

**18** Florian Mazacher, “The Art of Assembly,” recorded on July 11, 2022, <https://art-of-assembly.net/>. See also: Florian Malzacher, *Gesellschaftsspiele: Politisches Theater heute* (Berlin: Alexander Press, 2020).

**19** Leon, *Expanded Choreography*, 27.

**20** See definition of “vulnerable”: Catherine Soanes, ed., *Compact Oxford English Dictionary for University and College Students* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2006), 1166.

See also: Florian Pistor, “Vulnerabilität: Erläuterungen zu einem Schlüsselbegriff im Denken Judith Butlers,” *Zeitschrift für Praktische Philosophie* 3, no. 1 (2016): 233–272.

**21** Francis Wade, “Judith Butler on the Violence of Neglect Amid a Health Crisis: A conversation with the theorist about her new book *The Force of Nonviolence*, and the need for global solidarity in the pandemic world,” *The Nation*, May 13, 2020, <https://www.thenation.com/article/culture/judith-butler-force-of-nonviolence-interview/>.

**22** Judith Butler, *Precarious Life: The Powers of Mourning and Violence* (London; New York: Verso, 2006), xii.

**23** Judith Butler, “Bodily Vulnerability, Coalitions, and Street Politics,” *Critical Studies* 37, no. 1 (2014): 97–119: 103.

**24** Raimund Hoghe, “Den Körper in den Kampf werfen: Behinderungen schockieren auf der Bühne oft mehr als Gewalt: ein Plädoyer für das Unperfekte,” *Zeitschrift für Kultur* 765, no. 3 (April 2006), [http://www.raimundhoghe.com/de/de\\_dasunperfekte.html](http://www.raimundhoghe.com/de/de_dasunperfekte.html).

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# Transdisciplinary Curation in the Performing Arts

## Gwendolin Lehnerer

### A Promise?

Transdisciplinarity—a term that carries an immanent permeability, a dissolving of modern categories, a neo-baroque promise to cut across disciplines, to push boundaries, and to become more hybrid in order to create something new? A promise also for collective structures and an exchange of knowledge between cultures? From the point of view of the philosophy of science, transdisciplinarity<sup>1</sup> is not as much a promise as it is a specific constellation, a curated gathering of disciplines with a common purpose that addresses and includes social issues and actors. However, it has not yet been defined what transdisciplinarity means in the arts, and more specifically in the performing arts.<sup>2</sup>

In order to explore transdisciplinarity as a frequently occurring phenomenon in the performing arts, one has to discover a method that makes it possible to *dive into the trans* and to reveal both the institutional and artistic implications in relation to transdisciplinary structures. For the purpose of approaching this phenomenon from multiple perspectives and to include both its structural and aesthetic form, a “structural-phenomenological double perspective”<sup>3</sup> as proposed by Nicole Haitzinger will be adopted here. This corresponds to the view of the philosophy of science that considers transdisciplinarity not to be a contingent meeting of divergent disciplines, but a concrete practice in which the collaborative work of different actors is curated, constellated, coordinated, organized, and contextualized, and which is accompanied by experiences of differences of all kinds. In the arts, this can be emphasized as a method that is a very integral part of a curatorial practice in which the abovementioned practices are united and are usually implied in a processual manner for a limited period of time. A transdisciplinary curation can not only involve different disciplines of art, but also actors outside the arts. This expands the perspective to scopes of action that include social problem areas.<sup>4</sup> The potential power of transdisciplinary curations lies in the handling of boundary experiences and in its reflexive and self-reflexive practices,<sup>5</sup> which become necessary and evident when it comes to an exchange with other knowledge cultures and their protagonists. From a purely formal point of view, transdisciplinarity as a practice and method of curating can be analyzed from the perspective of both the performing and visual arts, as it describes the conjuncture of both disciplines (and others) in common constellations. When the theater or the museum are taken into account as scenes of transdisciplinary curation, it is important to take seriously the different modes of theater (performance/black box) and museum (exhibition/white cube) as settings of the respective curatorial practice, which are influenced by divergent time structures, architectures, rituals, and codes and thus differ greatly from one another. Transdisciplinary curation in a black box faces different challenges than transdisciplinary curation in a white cube, even though the artistic formats become more and more hybrid in their form and often move fluidly between different architectures and time structures. The following analysis focuses on transdisciplinary curation in the performing arts, since it unites a wide spectrum of art disciplines such as dance, opera, performance, and theater,

and the whole concept of the performing arts is oriented transdisciplinarity. For the purpose of differentiation, however, an example of transdisciplinary curation in the visual arts will be given at first in order to comparatively explore divergences in curation and to better comprehend different problem areas of the theater and museum as *dispositif*.

### Kassel as a General Showplace

There is one venue in particular that lends itself to such an analysis in order to observe the correlation of transdisciplinary curation of the performing and visual arts from a structural-phenomenological double perspective: the Friedrichsplatz in Kassel. Not only is the Staatstheater Kassel located here, but the Fridericianum and the documenta Halle also adjoin its plaza, next to the theater. In May 2022, the Friedrichsplatz hosted two forms of transdisciplinary curation at once: on the one hand, *documenta fifteen*, curated by the Indonesian artist collective ruangrupa, who had just started the construction work on the exhibition that month. On the other hand, the *Inbetween* theater festival, hosted by the Staatstheater Kassel. Both are venues of transdisciplinary curation that lend themselves to a structural-phenomenological double perspective not only through their spatial proximity. The transdisciplinary exhibition concept of ruangrupa (*lumbung* – rice barn) transformed itself from the declared exhibition concept into a transdisciplinary gathering space,<sup>6</sup> where various artists and collective could meet and work.

ruangrupa considered *lumbung* to be an “artistic and economic model is rooted in principles such as collectivity, communal resource sharing, and equal allocation”<sup>7</sup> that was to be realized “in all parts of the collaboration and the exhibition.”<sup>8</sup> The curatorial concept focused on transdisciplinary encounters that were supposed to not only bring together artists and activists, but also social actors such as small farmers. This was to be achieved both through the individual works as well as the encounters between the different actors.

Paradigmatic for the transdisciplinary and curatorial positing is Baan Noorg’s contribution, “comprising a dairy farm exchange program, *Nang Yai* (Thai shadow puppetry), and a skateboarding ramp in documenta Halle.”<sup>9</sup> In ruangrupa’s conception, the *research objective* usually underlying transdisciplinary research is decidedly based on the enabling of an alternative economy and “work on new models of sustainability.”<sup>10</sup> It is thus quite consistent with the origin of the term *transdisciplinarity* in the philosophy of science, although in this case one would rather see it as some kind of curatorial research that explores sustainability models through transdisciplinary working methods.

Structurally, ruangrupa’s concept also opposes the representative world exhibition model that clings to *documenta* as a major exhibition, and which could have been given more historical and local contextualization, as Hito Steyerl noted in her critical contribution to *documenta fifteen* in the wake of the scandal around the artist collective Taring Padi’s banner.<sup>11</sup> In retrospect, the criticism of *documenta fifteen* is not only politically charged because of specific events, but is also evoked by the curatorial concept, which took conceptual risks from the very beginning. A space in which international artists meet social actors such as political collectives and activists would have to be curated in a way that is anti-discriminatory at every level. Furthermore, the curatorial team would have to accept liability—“responsibility”<sup>12</sup>—for both the content and the protagonists. In this case, neither was done adequately.

Nevertheless, *lumbung* at *documenta fifteen* is an astonishing transdisciplinary curation that goes beyond curating art and includes both political collectives and everyday actors in a performing way and contains research and practice aspects, which is also clearly outlined in its concept.

### White Cube vs. Black Box

While *ruangrupa* was still preparing for *documenta fifteen*, the festival *Inbetween: Theater zwischen Aufführung und Ausstellung* started at Staatstheater Kassel on May 22, 2022. The festival explored the discursive, architectural, artistic, and ritual mechanisms of theater through transdisciplinary curation. Under the artistic direction of dramaturge Dirk Baumann, it explored disciplinary boundaries, posed research questions, and abrogated and problematized visual habits and rituals. The three-day transdisciplinary program included installations, performances, dance, theater, and debates.

In addition to *documenta fifteen*, the *Inbetween* festival is another example for transdisciplinary curation, although in the field of the performing arts, which offers its transdisciplinary repositioning as an experimental space or curatorial *research laboratory*. The priority of its curatorial concept is to answer the question of how the German-speaking theater will develop in the future in the wake of constant hybridization phenomena.

In a conceptual sense, this meant that the festival's theatrical structures and rituals were abandoned and replaced by a museal course of action for a specific period of time: starting and closing times of the performances were replaced in favor of opening hours common for a museum, and thus aligned with museal conventions. Thus, visitors were able to visit the interactive room installation *I am (VR)* (Susanne Kennedy), the participatory installation *The Situation Room* (Franz Reimer), or *Zeit-Fugen/inbetweens #3, Kassel* (Wolf Gutjahr) all day long in the theater's foyer, entrance area, or courtyard. This way, the festival visitors were also able to explore the spaces by themselves and schedule a unique art experience. The piece *Häusliche Gewalt*—a five-hour performance by Markus Öhm—followed this style as well, as the visitors could leave and re-enter the performance as if they were in an exhibition space. The classical conventions of the black box (the separation between the stage and auditorium, actors and visitors, opening and closing times) collided with a museal setting that allowed the visitors to become autonomous actors. In contrast to *documenta fifteen*, the aim was not to create a sustainable and collective gathering and working space, but to explore a different mode of the visitor as a subject, moving freely in the in-between of the *dispositif*. The immersive performance *Vanitas* by Sebastian Blasius suspended theatrical conventions as well. Here, the visitor or actor sat at a table with performers and non-professionals, who followed the rhythm of their pulse transmitted into the space. The suspension of the separation of stage and auditorium as well as the isolation or separation of the individual visitor from the audience turned the spectacle upside down—the visitor became the actor and the instigator of the performance and thereby gave it meaning.

### In Between Disciplines

The festival also hosted a discursive format that negotiated the institutional, architectural, and aesthetic consequences of an increasingly hybrid and transdisciplinary focus in theater. International guests from practice were invited to engage in discussions together with protagonists from academia and the performing and visual arts. The discursive format was not part of a framework program, but an inde-

pendent event alongside the artistic exploration of the festival's objectives. This exploration focused on the specific performance practices and shifts in the performing arts and its transformation within its architectural, structural, aesthetic, and artistic modalities.

In her lecture *Ausstellung und Aufführung als rituelle Topologien*, art historian and author Dorothea von Hantelmann addressed the different *dispositifs* of the theater and the museum, as well as the specific rituals carried out there, which constantly produce different forms of subjectivation.<sup>13</sup> When these topologies change because of a shift of performance modalities or a hybridization of art forms and institutions, the question arises as to which future subjects will be produced in these scenarios and whether—according to Hantelmann—a new ritual space is needed for the 21st century.<sup>14</sup> This space could bring together theater (collective gathering) and museum (individualized gathering), possibly even link all the arts with other disciplines. According to Hantelmann, such a transdisciplinary gathering space would have to overcome the “predominance of the visual,” “introduce opening hours,” and “offer transformative topologies.”<sup>15</sup> Hantelmann states: “The sheer bringing together of different art forms under one roof does not mean that they necessarily connect. [...] Architecture is a key factor here, as it literally sets in stone how spaces are used.”<sup>16</sup>

The quest to find a new space for transdisciplinary constellations was also discussed by Barbara Büscher, head of the research project *Architecture and Space for the Performance Arts* at Hochschule für Musik und Theater Leipzig, in her lecture “Mobile Venues and Urban Palaces: Models and Projects of Flexible Performance Architecture.”<sup>17</sup> Büscher led the audience through a series of historical predecessors that were explicitly dedicated to a transdisciplinary orientation. Historically, one of the most incisive ideas is Joan Littlewood's and Cedric Price's *Fun-Palace* from 1961, which aimed to unite the arts and much more in its architecture. Other



Activist artist Marissa Lôbo invited to group show co-curated by the students of the *Curating in the Performing Arts* university course, 2017, SZENE Salzburg. Photograph by: Hubert Auer.

examples of the search for a space with a transdisciplinary architecture are contemporary architectures such as the cultural center *The Shed* in New York or the cultural campus *Quasar Al Hosn* in the specially converted fortress in Abu Dhabi.

### Models of Time and Space in Transdisciplinary Curation

The discursive format also dealt with the discussion around models of space and time and their effects on the curation of the formats. Participants were the artist duo Theda & Julian Nilsson-Eicke, Sebastian Hannak, Barbara Büscher, and Jörn Schafaff, who talked about spatial and temporal structures and formats—such as the rehearsal as an interspace<sup>18</sup>—or the work *Zeitfugen* by Wolf Gutjahr.<sup>19</sup> Curating transdisciplinary settings requires dramaturgies in space or even its very own narratives that are designed both spatially and temporally and react equally to the conditions of formats and architecture. On the basis of curation in dance in her relevant work *Choreographies of the Curatorial: Performative Trajectories for Choreography and Dance in the Museum*, Sarah Spies locates this development as a “contemporary extension in the experiments of transdisciplinary art forms and interdisciplinary crossover genres of the 1960s art movements,”<sup>20</sup> which can also be perceived as a parallel development of the performing arts.

In a museal context, the transdisciplinary curation of performing arts increasingly requires adapting the structures of the black box, or to offer them flexibly. Rehearsal spaces and dressing rooms thus become new spaces of consumption in the museum as well. Vice versa, transdisciplinary settings in theater result in divergent but similar drastic transformations: classical theater structures, such as a permanent ensemble, workshops, the ticketing system, or the logistics of stage elements must be structured differently when installations and other formats of the visual arts find their way into theater.

### A Kind of Consequence

At the intersection of the arts and other disciplines—the *Third Space* of transdisciplinary curations—hybrid and processual identities are created in the best case.<sup>21</sup> Representation is replaced, or at least intended to, by collaboration and collectivity. The relational subject forming in this frame of reference gets to experience the arts rather in its actor-theoretical-material relation<sup>22</sup> and becomes an actor itself. On the other hand, there is the often inflexible and ritualized structure of the theater and museum as a consequence, being stretched to its architectural and discursive limits, but also at times exploring and shifting them. One of the challenges for every curation is the repurposing or reinterpretation of these ritualized places that often occupy spaces in a very specific way into a transdisciplinary structure. In the best case, however, *Third Spaces* like foyers, dressing rooms, or canteens develop and transform themselves. According to Homi K. Bhabha, *Third Spaces* are not places of mingling, but spaces where hybridity emerges through the “strategic and selective adoption of meanings.”<sup>23</sup> As he states:

But for me the importance of hybridity is not to be able to trace two original moments from which the third emerges, rather hybridity to me is the ‘third space’ which enables other positions to emerge. This third space displaces the histories that constitute it, and sets up new structures of authority, new political initiatives, which are inadequately understood through received wisdom.<sup>24</sup>

It is in those spaces of negotiation where disciplinary perspectives and lines of sight are re-explored and different mindsets come together.<sup>25</sup> This applies not only to the repurposing of spaces, but also to different disciplines and actors or logistics that are important for transdisciplinary curation. In their performativity and theatricality, the performing arts facilitate forms of relationality in spaces, as well as interactions between movement and a static object, or visitors following the dramaturgical gesture of a narrative in a space. These are spaces that invite to act and that produce actors who are decidedly encouraged to make their own decisions about reception. But it is not only the black box and the white cube, not only exhibition and performance that use the tools of the respective *other* craft. New links working on a purely curatorial level between institutions and art forms are also on the rise and being renegotiated. For the social function of the institutions and individual curation also entails a responsibility that not only has political, social, and ethical implications. According to Donna J. Haraway, it also includes a “response-ability”<sup>26</sup> that transforms questions of care, sustainability, and hospitality<sup>27</sup> into decisive criteria of transdisciplinary curation and always comes along with a transformational potential.<sup>28</sup> In this respect, transdisciplinarity is not simply a given, but describes a specific practice of curating that has radical consequences and effects for the institution and its actors and visitors. The extent to which transdisciplinary curation is necessary, exciting, and has a promising future will be measured by the degree of its response-ability to its environment, its locality, its actors and materials, its relationships and linkages. Localities such as biennials and festivals therefore offer a good experimental space to that end. If we think further, however, spaces may emerge in the future in which this practice could further be elaborated and expanded for the benefit of the actors and disciplines. This could be achieved, for example, by organizing festivals in a way that creates longer-term structures for exchange and the development of relationships and mutual trust, and as a space for after-care to create networks between the theater and the museum, between the arts and society and between spaces and time.

## Notes

**1** Viorela Dan describes the understanding of transdisciplinarity as a “decades-long process of negotiation” that has been constantly changing since its introduction in the 1970s by E. Jantsch in his article “Inter- and Transdisciplinary University: A Systems Approach to Education and Innovation.” (1972). While J. Mittelstraß sees “the engagement with practical problems” as an important feature of transdisciplinary research, Dan describes today’s understanding of transdisciplinarity as an “engagement with societal problems, the inclusion of actors outside academia in research, and the expectation that researchers support the practical implementation of their findings.” Viorela Dan, “Formen der Wissensgenerierung: Transdisziplinari-tät im Vergleich zu Mono-, Multi- und Interdisziplinarität,” in *Gesundheitskommunikation als transdisziplinäres Forschungsfeld* (Baden-Baden: Nomos, 2017), 1–11: 4.

**2** “Transdisziplinari-tät,” ZHdK, last modified August 1, 2022, <https://www.zhdk.ch/forschung/ehemalige-forschungsinstitute-7626/iae/glossar-972/transdisziplinari-taet-3841>.

**3** Nicole Haitzinger, “Szenische Präsenz im Museum: Thesenhafte Überlegungen zur Ausstellungsanalyse aus theater- und tanzwissenschaftlicher Perspektive,” in *Evidenzen des Expositorischen: Wie in Ausstellungen Wissen, Erkenntnis und ästhetische Bedeutung erzeugt wird*, eds. Klaus Krüger, Elke Werner, Andreas Schalhorn (Bielefeld: transcript, 2019), 181–202.



**4** In transdisciplinary contexts, questions about the political, social, and ethical premises of collaborative research become particularly evident, as collaborations exist between different contexts, disciplines, and social classes; there is no such thing as a homogeneous research team that can refer to a common state of research.

**5** “Transdisziplinarität.”

**6** Dorothea von Hantelmann, “What is the New Ritual Space for the 21st Century,” The Shed, last modified June 8, 2022, <https://theshed.org/program/series/2-a-prelude-to-the-shed/new-ritual-space-21st-century>.

**7** ruangrupa, “documenta fifteen,” last modified June 10, 2022, <https://documenta-fifteen.de/en>.

**8** Ibid.

**9** See ruangrupa, “Baan Noorg Collaborative Arts and Culture,” last modified May 3, 2022, <https://documenta-fifteen.de/en/lumbung-members-artists/baan-noorg-collaborative-arts-and-culture/>.

**10** ruangrupa, “documenta fifteen.”

**11** Hito Steyerl, “documenta fünfzehn: Kontext ist König, außer der deutsche,” *Zeit Online*, June 3, 2022, accessed November 13, 2022, <https://www.zeit.de/kultur/kunst/2022-06/documenta-15-postkoloniale-theorien-kunst-kontextualisierung>.

**12** “Response-ability” is a term used by science theorist Donna J. Haraway in her book “Staying with the Trouble” (2016) to advocate a broader understanding of the political and ethical aspects of relationships in a more-than-human world (Haraway 2016, 232). In relation to the *documenta fifteen* team, this would mean accepting liability not only for the protagonists, but also for the use of resources by the festival, the locality they occupy, and the exhibited art.

**13** Dorothea von Hantelmann, “Ausstellung und Aufführung als rituelle Topologien,” in *Impulsvortrag beim Inbetween Festival* (Kassel: *Inbetween*, 22.–24. Mai 2022), 1–12.

**14** von Hantelmann, “What is the New Ritual Space for the 21st Century.”

**15** Ibid.

**16** Ibid.

**17** Barbara Büscher, “Mobile Venues and Urban Palaces: Models and Projects of Flexible Performance Architecture,” in *Impulsvortrag beim Inbetween Festival* (Kassel: *Inbetween*, May 22–24, 2022), 1–12.

**18** Jörn Schafaff, “Always rehearsing, never performing—Die Probe als Zwischenraum,” in *Impulsvortrag beim Inbetween Festival*, accessed November 17, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K7aTwKVVj9w&list=PLrWdVlj5E-mmnAPADynK4bzoCRLs6vnE4&index=2>.

**19** Dirk Baumann, “Welche Auswirkungen haben neue Raum- und Zeitmodelle auf Aufführungsarchitekturen der darstellenden Künste?,” in “A panel discussion with Sebastian Hannak, Barbara Büscher, Jörn Schafaff, Theda & Julian Nilsson-Eicke and Wolf Gutjahr,” moderated by Dirk Baumann at *Inbetween Festival*, accessed November 17, 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=K7aTwKVVj9w&list=PLrWdVlj5E-mmnAPADynK4bzoCRLs6vnE4&index=2>.

**20** As Sarah Spies explains, “Within this trajectory, curators and choreographers often seek to reinstate dance and choreographic thinking as generators of the micro- and macro-ecologies that have shaped creative practice in the 20th and 21st centuries. These include distinct public programmes that have been developed with prominent choreographers and curators at Hayward Gallery (Stephanie Rosenthal’s *MOVE: Choreographing You—Art and Dance Since the 1960s*, 2011), MoMA PS1 (Mårten Spångberg’s *The Dancing Seminar: A Listening Dance*, 2013 and Xavier Le Roy’s *Retrospective*, 2014), Tate Modern (Tino Seghal’s *The Unilever Series – These Associations*, 2012 and Boris Charmatz’s *If Tate Modern was Musée de la*

*danse?*, 2015) and Centre Pompidou (Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker's *Work/Travail/Arbeid*, 2016 and reworked at Tate Modern, 2016 and MoMA, 2017) to name but a few. The above-mentioned choreographers, and many others, situate the conceptualisation of choreography and choreographic processes as an expanded practice within both the history of visual art and contemporary art practice by fundamentally rethinking dance works as exhibition pieces, rather than theatre pieces. This contemporary expansion has its roots in the experiments of the transdisciplinary art forms and interdisciplinary crossover genres of the art movements of the 1960s." Sarah Spies, *Choreographies of the Curatorial. Performative Trajectories for Choreography and Dance in the Museum* (PhD diss., University of Reading, 2020), 11.

**21** Homi K. Bhabha, "The Third Space: Interview with Jonathan Rutherford," in *Identity, Community, Culture, Difference* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1990), 201–221.

**22** See Isabelle Stengers, *Spekulativer Konstruktivismus* (Berlin: Merve, 2008).

**23** Homi K. Bhabha, "Migration führt zu ‚hybrider‘ Gesellschaft," in *Science.ORF.at*, November 11, 2007, <https://sciencev1.orf.at/science/news/149988.html>.

**24** Bhabha, "The Third Space," 211.

**25** According to Bhabha, Hybridization and the concept of the third space are not conceptualized in the sense of a strategy of leveling difference, but used as a metaphor for certain epistemic processes in which – according to Uwe Wirth – there is a crossing as well as an unexpected encounter of concepts from different scientific fields. In these, differences are not resolved, but new constellations are produced. In this way, foyers, dressing rooms or canteens of the performing arts can be reinterpreted as transdisciplinary knowledge spaces and thus, spaces for encounter can be created. Uwe Wirth, "Gepfropfte Theorie: Eine ‚greffologische‘ Kritik von Hybriditätskonzepten als Beschreibung von intermedialen und interkulturellen Beziehungen," in: *TheorieTheorie. Wider die Methodenmüdigkeit in den Geisteswissenschaften*, eds. Mario Grizelj and Oliver Jahraus (München: Wilhelm Fink, 2011), 151–166: 163.

**26** Donna J. Haraway, *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene* (Cambridge: Academic Press, 2016).

**27** Beatrice von Bismarck, *Das Kuratorische* (Leipzig: Spector Books, 2021), 185–223.

**27** Richard Beecroft, "Reallabore als Rahmen transformativer und transdisziplinärer Forschung: Ziele und Designprinzipien," in *Transdisziplinär und transformativ forschen. Eine Methodensammlung*, eds. Rico Defila and Antonietta Di Giulio (Wiesbaden: Springer, 2018), 75–99.

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# Promises and Pitfalls of “Political” Curating in Live Arts

## Gurur Ertem

### Preamble

A group of people convened in the mid-1990s at the modern dance classes Christine Brodbeck was teaching—almost for free—on most days of the week. The studio that Brodbeck had rented for these classes was located in a building, also known as the monastery, with many art studios in the Tarlabasi neighborhood of Istanbul. The building was later demolished, and the studios were lost as part of some enforced gentrification projects of neoliberal urban transformation, which constituted one of the reasons for the Gezi Park Protests, which I will talk about below.

The 1990s were also a time when choreographers such as Geyvan McMillan and Aydin Teker were teaching workshops to non-dancers in university settings. Some later well-known choreographers such as Mehmet Sander, Ziya Azazi, and Mustafa Kaplan, who were engineering students at that time, are from this cohort. Mustafa Kaplan, who also taught as a substitute teacher when Christine Brodbeck was not present, was employed on a part-time basis at the Theatre Research Laboratory of the City Theatre of Istanbul, founded by Beklan Algan and Ayla Algan. Mustafa invited self-taught dancers from many walks of life and educational backgrounds to work with him on a project basis in exchange for free classes each evening at these studios. From these evening sessions grew friendships and projects. Some participants pursued professional dance training abroad, while others chose different paths, still related to dance, like myself.

As part of the not-for-profit, self-organized initiative Bimeras, I co-organized and programmed the iDANS Festival for Contemporary Dance and Performance in Istanbul between 2006–2014. The festival had been significant for articulating Turkey’s emerging independent contemporary dance scene with its European counterparts. I believe it also served as an example of the self-organization of a group of individuals dedicated to developing their field.

While I was pursuing my graduate studies in performance studies and sociology abroad, Aydin Silier founded Bimeras to support the international touring, education, and distribution of independent choreographers. When IETM Network<sup>1</sup> called for a program comprising local artists for its plenary meeting in Istanbul in 2006, Bimeras responded instead by organizing an international marathon program titled *IstanbulREConnects* that hosted artists from Turkey and the neighboring countries such as Cyprus, Greece, Bulgaria. The motivation was to take a political position against essentializing cultural and national identities and to emphasize the cross-pollination and hybridity of cultures, as well as questioning the artificial bordering processes of nation states, especially those in proximity with numerous shared customs, songs, and traditions. *IstanbulREConnects* evolved into the iDANS Festival.

iDANS was the first festival of its kind in Turkey that was based on a curatorial vision and thematic inquiry. It featured yearly around thirty international performances that included co-productions, commissions. Besides live performances, the festival also organized conferences, publications, workshops, public art projects, and installations.

It sought to assert contemporary dance as a salient field of knowledge production and a vibrant artistic field.

As of 2010, projects in public spaces—repercussions—of which never failed to surprise—comprised a significant focus of the festival. When the largest public space performance in the history of Turkey, the Gezi Uprising, took place in 2013, we decided to suspend the festival in its existing format. We no longer found the festival format as an appropriate response to the pressing issues of our times.<sup>2</sup>

### **One Cannot Curate a Revolution; One Can Only Join it**

During the days leading up to the Gezi Uprising, iDANS was working on the commissioned special project *Addio alla Fine* [Farewell to the End] created by the Dutch choreographers Emio Greco and Pieter C. Scholten in collaboration with the interdisciplinary art collective biriken and the playwright Özen Yula. *Addio alla Fine* was conceived as a meditation on endings and on endings as new beginnings. Departing from the idea of bringing the audience—living in a period marked by scenarios of approaching ecological and political disaster—together on “Noah’s Ark,” the performance aimed to take the passengers on a carnivalesque boat journey departing from Halic Tersanesi, one of the oldest shipyards in the world located at the Golden Horn, the inner harbor of Istanbul. Because the carnivalesque, joyous and participatory content of the work became a reality during the Gezi Park occupation, we decided to direct the interested public to the Gezi Park as we judged there would be no better place to imagine a new beginning and to invent political culture than there. We maintained that, in a way, *Addio alla Fine* had already begun, merging into the spirit of a pluralistic participatory democracy movement, and invited the public to join the journey at Gezi Park.

Hannah Arendt describes “public happiness” as the “treasure” of revolutionary moments where a sense of possibility and potency prevail. Yet, this treasure is fragile because it comes to being through action, the consequences of which cannot be foreseen. Political action, for Arendt, is performance *par excellence*: it does not subscribe to a means-ends rationality; it is an end in itself. In that regard, it is similar to a virtuoso performance where one enjoys acting for its own sake.

As the courses of action are irreversible and unpredictable, this “treasure” can get lost in the murk of history. Establishing a common world and carrying forth the legacy of revolutionary moments requires skilled “pearl divers” who memorialize this “lost treasure” through stories, artworks, poetry, and historiography. And, for these to be able to appear, to be looked at and talked about in ways that matter depends, of course, on the existence of spaces of appearance, which is precisely what authoritarian regimes aim to eradicate.

The culture-creating spontaneity and the world-making dimensions of the uprising manifested the intertwinement of aesthetics and politics in such a way that no artistic program in/for/about public spaces and no artworks with political pretensions could approximate. In the light of these experiences, I chose an active withdrawal from the curatorial field and continued to think, write, teach, learn, and inquire about the affective and aesthetic enunciations of the political outside the confines of the art world. I’ve been attending to how communities and artists make sense of, bear witness and respond to political developments in the wake of the Gezi Uprising in Turkey and beyond. In a way, I’ve come to agree with Oliver Marchart’s view that a truly political position on the part of the curator can only be achieved outside the art world.

I also concur with Marchart’s view that one cannot assume that exhibitions, theatres, and other cultural institutions and their programs are always already a public sphere because it is accessible to the public.<sup>3</sup> Universal access and inclusivity regarding the representation of so-called marginal artists do not turn a space into a public sphere or “a space of appearance,” as Hannah Arendt would call it.<sup>4</sup> Marchart draws on Ernesto Laclau’s and Chantal Mouffe’s positions on the notion of the political—which entails an ineradicable dimension of conflict and antagonism and aims at disarticulating a hegemonic formation. Therefore, Marchart argues, a truly public sphere emerges only when conflict arises. More importantly, Marchart says that conflict and antagonism cannot be organized. It just breaks out and cannot be foreseen. That is, one cannot curate or organize a revolution or conflict.<sup>5</sup> It may only prepare the conditions for different positions to emerge. Marchart maintains that a genuinely political sphere cannot be produced in the field of art, while a conflict that breaks in the art world will revolve around artistic, field-specific questions. In that regard, the curator’s true political standpoint can only be as an intellectual who works to change and influence culture and political agendas for a counter-hegemonic project. As such, the curator stands outside the field of art, actively organizing in social and political contexts beyond the art institution and connecting these back to the field of art.

### **Pseudo-Politicity of Identity Politics in Curating**

Curatorial practice is an exercise of the faculty of judgment as much as it is a practice of care. Yet, I discern an absence of judgment and thorough thinking in the field today, especially in those self-proclaimed political or activist orientations that focus on what I consider a problematic identity politics.

Let’s revisit how activist curating or curatorial activism is often understood today. In her book, *Curatorial Activism*, Maura Reilly argues that the art world is a fortress of straight white males whose dominance extends to museum collections, exhibitions, galleries, auction houses, and private collections.<sup>6</sup> Against this, she outlines several curatorial practices that provide visibility to underrepresented populations in chapters such as “Resisting Masculinism and Sexism,” “Tackling White Privilege and Western-Centrism,” and “Challenging Heterocentrism.” Reilly uses the term “Other artists” to describe a broad spectrum of marginalized groups such as non-white artists, LGBTQI+ artists, and feminists. She provides compelling statistics about their inclusion or the lack thereof in major exhibitions and art institutions. Similarly, artist and curator Jaamil Olawale Osoko calls for a radically inclusive decolonial curatorial practice and criticizes the lack of supportive inclusionary spaces for individuals who identify as trans, queer, disabled, Black, Indigenous, and other People of Color.<sup>7</sup> Many other artists, curators, programmers, and curatorial collectives voice similar concerns and create programs aiming for inclusivity and diversity in the manner of an “affirmative action” to represent perspectives from marginalized groups.

However, one problem with this is that many of these critical endeavors engage in an institutional critique of sorts, seeming to imagine MoMA as the paradigmatic example of an arts institution today, and consider it as their primary interlocutor, overlooking the peripheries of the art world where communities and independent initiatives abound. Another problem with this approach, which I think is the most important one, is that it risks falling prey to identity politics that are not necessarily emancipatory but affirmative of the neoliberal status quo. Furthermore, they risk insinuating a forced performance of identity where unique, heterogeneous creative trajectories of artists get buried under identity categories and labels. In most artistic programming today, it’s as though there is a checklist of identity categories curators are compelled to

include. Often, this entails presenting artists from, for instance, migrant backgrounds, indigenous groups, feminist and queer perspectives, voices from the so-called Global South—as though the Global South is a monolithic entity and as if pockets of wealth and privilege do not exist there as well. Indisputably, the visibility of marginalized groups in the art world is a welcome development. Yet, the visibility and inclusion of minority positions do not necessarily lead to the empowerment of these groups for broader social change. Similarly, programming about climate change does not incent social transformation counteracting the planetary crisis if everybody is talking all at once in the art world about the same things and preaching to the converted.

To make my point clear, I would like to recall here Nancy Fraser’s criticism of liberal strands of identity politics (i.e., “feminism of the 1%”, “environmentalism of the rich”) and social movements. I also find it relevant from the perspective of the art world to heed her astute warning that we cannot establish a counter-hegemony by embracing what she calls “progressive neoliberalism” and the identity politics articulated with it.<sup>8</sup> Fraser had written in the 1990s about the “eclipse of redistribution [who deserves income] by recognition [who deserves rights]”<sup>9</sup> to understand what had gone wrong in the center-left and the left, both in academia and the broader political sphere, and to detect an imbalance in the thinking and practice of progressive forces whose one-sided focus on identity, status, and culture was obscuring the rise of neoliberalism.

Fraser contends that neoliberalism is more than an economic project but an entire institutionalized social order that can articulate with different and competing projects of recognition. Civil rights movements and women’s movements achieved essential gains, but these did not translate to social equality for all. It benefited the upper reaches of the professional-managerial class. In that stratum, women and People of Color had achieved significant gains, but this was not the case for everyone else. Fraser argues that the “window-dressing” for the neoliberal project came from the progressives.<sup>10</sup> They provided some cover for the free-market advocates by bringing in liberal-individualist currents of feminism, anti-racism, and LGBTQI+ rights, among others. As Fraser argues, the progressive neoliberal program did not aim to abolish social hierarchy but to diversify it. It “empowered” talented People of Color, sexual minorities, and women.<sup>11</sup> It is an inherently class-specific ideal geared to ensure that “deserving” individuals from underrepresented groups can attain positions and get equal pay with the straight white men of their class. In other words, beneficiaries could only be those already possessing the social, cultural, and economic capital.

Mainstream neoliberal currents of the new social movements and the high-end, symbolic forces of the economy formed a distinctive combination of views about distribution and recognition. The progressive neoliberal bloc aimed to liberalize and globalize the capitalist economy, which meant financialization and dismantling barriers to and protections from the free movement of capital, deregulating banking and predatory debt, deindustrialization, weakening unions, and spreading precarious, poorly paid work. These policies hollowed out working-class and middle-class living standards, transferring value and wealth to the top one percent.

None of this should imply that we should silence pressing concerns about gender inequality, racism, ethnonationalism, sexism, homophobia, and transphobia. Fighting these issues is of utmost importance. Yet, it would be counterproductive to treat these as singular issues unrelated to the global capitalist social order. Constituents of the global crisis converge—planetary heating, ballooning precarity, declining living standards, racialized and sexualized violence, authoritarianism, militarization, war... The

emancipatory coalition that offers a response to this nexus should be connecting the multiple social movements on a strand, and specially be sensitive to class dynamics. To realize the critical potential of curating, one needs to attend to the affective dimensions of the political and the specific economic and social conditions underlying racist and sexist articulations. A merely moralistic approach or one that is based on scientific arguments does not suffice. A truly political curating needs to build communities that go beyond artistic tribes and aim for a genuine plurality instead of caricatures of diversity, traversing the lines that fragment contemporary public discourse.

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## Notes

**1** Founded in 1981, IETM International Network for Contemporary Performing Arts is one of the oldest and largest international cultural networks mainly linked to the independent performing arts scene. See <https://www.ietm.org/en>.

**2** The Gezi Uprising was the largest wave of demonstrations and civil unrest in the history of modern Turkey. It began on May 27, 2013, as a sit-in by a group of environmental activists. According to a government-backed construction plan, Gezi Park, a public park in the center of Istanbul, was to be demolished. A replica of an Ottoman-era barracks would be built in its place, housing a shopping mall and a luxury residence complex. For more than a year, numerous activists and neighborhood initiatives had been trying to prevent Taksim redevelopment measures. Over time, “Gezi” had become the overarching signifier, standing for a multiplicity of frustrations such as the growing authoritarianism of the government, interventions of the state into people’s lifestyles and choices, the commodification of public goods and spaces under neoliberal policies, nepotism and partisanship, police violence, and the abolition of the democratic mechanisms of checks and balances. The composition of the protesters was highly heterogeneous and encompassed both organized and non-organized groups such as the LGBTQ, Taksim Solidarity, numerous left-wing parties and unions, anti-capitalist Muslims, Alevis, Kurds, Kemalists, students, artists, and football fans. A broad range of social, cultural, and ethnic groups who would not come together under normal conditions, as well as thousands of individuals with no prior political affiliation who felt excluded from the ruling party’s definition of “the people,” were united in revolt.

**3** Oliver Marchart, *Conflictual Aesthetics: Artistic Activism and the Public Sphere* (Berlin, New York: Sternberg Press, 2019).

**4** See Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The Chicago University Press, 1958), 199.

**5** One cannot curate or organize a revolution, but the president of Turkey and his judiciary extensions think otherwise! It is absurd that the philanthropist and cultural organizer Osman Kavala is in jail for “organizing and financing” the Gezi Uprising. Furthermore, actor and playwright Mehmet Ali Alabora has been living in exile since 2013, for the government had accused him of “rehearsing the uprising” with the play *Mi Minor* directed in 2012. About the play *Mi Minor*, please see Burcu Yasemin Seyben, “My Life Has Become More Absurd Than My Play: ‘Mi Minor’ and the Crackdown on Artistic Freedom in Turkey,” *The Drama Review* 63, No. 3 (2019): 36–49.

**6** See Maura Reilly, *Curatorial Activism: Towards an Ethics of Curating* (London: Thames & Hudson, 2019).

**7** See Jaamil Olawale Kosoko, “Crisis in the Gallery: Curation and the Practice of Justice,” in *Allianzen: Kritische Praxis an weißen Institutionen*, eds. Elisa Liepsch, Julian Warner, Matthias Pees (Bielefeld: transcript, 2018), 118–130.

**8** Progressive neoliberalism is a term Nancy Fraser introduced to describe the phenomenon of the alliance of progressive forces with the tenets of neoliberalism. See: Nancy

Fraser, *The Old is Dying and the New Cannot be Born: From Progressive Neoliberalism to Trump and Beyond* (London: Verso, 2019). Also see Nancy Fraser, “Critique of Capitalism,” Public Lecture, The New School, Institute of Critical Social Inquiry, June 18, 2019, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mspR7LIP8NY>.

**9** Fraser, *The Old is Dying and the New Cannot be Born*, 37.

**10** Ibid., 11, 44.

**11** Ibid., 13.

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# How to Do Things with Care: Feminist Curating in Dance

## Kirsten Maar

*“Queer feminist curating is about thinking about politics through and with the body.”<sup>1</sup>*

How far does a feminist perspective transform the ways of curating in dance? What has changed in comparison to the 1960s and 1970s and the several waves of feminism that have emerged since then? And what can still be linked to those approaches? Does the term feminist need the addition of “queer,” or is feminism itself already thought in an empowering, emancipatory, and intersectional way? How do body politics have to be reframed in order to go beyond the representational and ensure emancipatory and empowering forms of agency?

### **From the Margins and Out of the Crisis**

Based on its ephemeral character, dance was for a long time marginalized within the canon of the art disciplines. The same applied for feminist positions in the arts—which have only slowly changed since the 1960s—and the emergence of performance, which was at least partly infiltrated by feminist thought and protagonists. The arguments fold into each other: both performance as an ephemeral, process-based art form without a circulating object and the vulnerability of the body in performance were supposed to counter its commodification.<sup>2</sup> But beyond few exceptions the canon of choreographic work was long designated to men. Dance performance with a decidedly gendered focus concentrated on issues of re-presentation, the staging of bodies, their images, the “bodies that mattered,” and only later on the institutional complex and the conditions of artistic production.

Already for quite some time, it has been common in the curatorial field to address its etymological roots in the Latin *curare*—as taking care of the collection, but also of the artists, their work, and working conditions. The latest turn in discussing the curatorial as care work has gone hand in hand with a decidedly feminist agenda. Even if these thoughts might at first sight apply to a traditional image of women, the focus on intersectional solidarity, again taking inspiration from BIPOC writers of the 1970s and ‘80s, when “the personal was political” and women in art fought for acknowledgment of their (until then) invisible work, or more precisely, not only for their invisible artistic work but for the acknowledgement of their daily unpaid work. Looking back to those kind of intervening, activist formats, such as, for instance, Mierle Laderman Ukeles’ Maintenance Art, Suzanne Lacy’s *International Dinner Party* or Judy Chicago’s *Womanhouse*, as well as to the writings of Kimberlé Crenshaw, bell hooks, or Audre Lorde, it was their specific way of addressing and including the audience and their vulnerability that prepared the field for the differentiation of feminisms today.

But these issues were not solved—this became obvious during the COVID crisis, which made us aware that the pandemic did not make us equal, as many hoped in its beginnings, but rather reinforced already existing inequalities in the health care sector, as well as in work-life and families. Under these circumstances and the neoliberalist requirements of a competitive and contested curatorial field, care issues attracted new

attention, and went hand in hand with entangled debates, which had been discussed already in the 1970s and 1980s, but which now found new synergetic momentum through moments of solidarity and activist interventions, such as #MeToo or Black Lives Matter; discussing motherhood, reproduction, and aging in dance; advocating for accessibility, inclusion, diversity, and visibility of BIPOC and LGBTQI+ people; fighting for safe spaces; and finally demanding an intersectional perspective.

### The Site-Specificities of Berlin

This article looks at the Berlin dance scene, particularly at small initiatives or new collectives; however, the brevity of this essay doesn't allow for a broader and more detailed description of additional and differently shaped feminist curating, which should have otherwise included established festival formats such as *The Future is F\*E\*M\*A\*L\*E\** or *Queer Darlings*, initiated by Franziska Werner and Anna Mülter; (queer-)feminist perspectives within curated programs like *Tanztage*, *Tanznacht*, *ada-studios*, *Montagsmodus/MMpraxis*, *Flutgraben e.V.*, *Lake Studios*, *Fortuna Wetten*, *neue Häute*, *PSR Performance Situation Room*, or *Gallery Wedding*; initiatives like *coven*, *lecken*, the *Iconic House of Saint Laurent*; or the program *feminist futures*, aligned with *Tanzfabrik Berlin* and its European residency program *apap* (advancing performing arts project) and many more... All these curated sites or programs are a part of processes that have evolved over the last thirty years after the fall of the Wall, and have contributed to making Berlin a place for new dance developments in the 1990s and 2000s up to now, with different dance scenes emancipating and claiming their place within the dance field, and new publics emerging, from contact communities to conceptual dance, from BMC to voguing and urban dance, which helped to establish a larger understanding of feminist practice in an extended, empowering sense.

From the Round Table for Dance in 2018, initiated in order to develop a concept for the future of dance in Berlin, several working groups emerged, from which I focus on three in particular which engaged in practices of archiving, mediation, and working



"Care Space" at group show co-curated by the students of the *Curating in the Performing Arts* university course, 2017, SZENE Salzburg. Photograph

conditions, and are implicitly concerned with questions of a larger curatorial context. These include the question of archiving and, through this, questioning the canon; taking into account oral herstories and different modes of scholarly and artistic methodologies like autoethnographic studies; the field of mediation and education, which promotes the participation of different social fields (like pedagogy, therapy, urban planning) and tries to address diverse audiences; and finally, supporting, promoting, and normalizing good practices within the working environments—addressing problems of violence, (self-)exploitation, exhaustion, and inequality within the scene. They have all brought a kind of feminist ethics into the debate on this culture-political initiative, and they take part in building a sustaining infrastructure—a framework for curatorial decisions—which is contested and negotiated again and again.

### **Situated Herstories Beyond Overarching Assemblies**

It is not surprising that care practices continue to be written about within feminist discourses, because they do not focus on large events, but rather on the small, unspectacular stories, as Ursula K. Le Guin points out in *The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction*,<sup>3</sup> which is driven by a feminist expansion of the science fiction genre and a reinterpretation of traditionally female activities: seeding, breeding, and collecting are not subjects of a hero's tale, but they also assemble their communities around related practices which are closely interwoven with their respective (embodied) narratives. Furthermore, as a practice, storytelling is performed in front of a listening audience; it is a speculative and subversive approach, operative in the foundations of alternative cartographies and geopolitics, or of experimental laboratories. With Donna Haraway, one could add that they demand a partial perspective and the situatedness of knowledge,<sup>4</sup> questioning a white, male claim for universal and "objective" knowledge which separates the world into us and them, into nature-culture, body-mind, etc.

From this rather "weak" position, it seems quite logical that the practices of curating as *curare* come quite close to the issues of hospitality, which have emerged against the background of the current socio-political situation.<sup>5</sup> "Its [hospitality's] inherent aporia between the unconditional openness towards welcoming everyone and everything that is on the way and interested in hospitable reception and the exclusions that are legitimized by rules set in the field"<sup>6</sup> can be taken as a conditional paradox of curatorial care.

Feminist theorists like Audre Lorde, Kimberlé Crenshaw, Sarah Ahmed, and others have set the conditions for practices of welcoming, generosity, receptivity, and listening and their sociopolitical relevance.

With a slight shift in direction, the philosopher Eva von Redecker calls into question the status of assembly, as it was discussed in philosophy after 1989 and the loss of a socialist utopia. Since an assembly cannot rely on its good intentions and the gathering itself, in her eyes, the idea of assembly and thus also of participatory art work has to be re-framed beyond mere representation and an "ableist appeal to mobilization"; it needs a more precise focus as well as a strict slowdown.<sup>7</sup> Taking time and giving time seem to be the most urgent task. Thus, care work does not function as a singular event either; it demands routines, repetition, and a continuous practice, de-centering forces, strategies, and embodied routines. As a result, it implies not only thinking about a curatorial program but also about sustainable institutional infrastructures and micro-politics, which are not so much based on networking as on collective trust.

## Ecologies of Practices

Inasmuch as they acknowledge the shifts that have taken place, new formats, which undermine the former separation between production and presentation and which take into account the importance of practices and giving time, can be considered an example. Practices are not exercised in a solipsistic retreat in the studio, but rather understood as something which is to be shared within the community and open to the public.<sup>8</sup> Strategies of selecting, combining, arranging, presenting, and communicating one's own body, as introduced to the visual arts by minimal and conceptual artists in the 1960s and 1970s, and also adapted in dance, led to so-called immaterial or affective labor<sup>9</sup> and (self-)exhaustion entangled with neoliberalist strategies. These conceptual, immaterial practices run across and permeate disciplines and professions between research and the arts. Given this development, the focus has shifted to an understanding of an ecology of practices, as Silke Bake, Alice Chauchat, Bettina Knaup, and Siegmund Zacharias proposed with a curated program, initiated in 2016/17:

The permanent state of crisis, which we witness today, can't be restored to a previous sense of order, neither through disciplinary / disciplining thought nor through acts of distancing and exclusion. It requires global agency and imagination, which bears with the un-known and takes into account our relational interdependency. It requires radical openness, a speculative attitude, pleasure in engaging with the un-known and un-certain and a willingness to think beyond human-centred categories and temporal and spatial dimensions. Classical ecology is the theory of environmental relations, of distribution and movement of energy and matter in a house(hold). Meanwhile the term is used in a broader sense – including the social, the environmental, the intellectual realms.<sup>10</sup>

This “ecological” and transformative approach takes into account the relationship between us and our environments, and it is attentive to how the social world may be engaged in processes of de- and recontextualizing the world around us, not believing and remaining in already existing essentialisms.

### “Handle with Care” – Beyond the Dis-Illusions of the Curatorial

It is not astonishing that a rather large part of those issues discussed within the ethics of curating and curating care were already present for a long time within the field of dance: you never dance alone—as a relational practice, dance gives us mindful techniques like body-mind centering, release, or contact improvisation, in which breathing, taking time, and a different kind of awareness of our environments are at stake, and which can be used in an empowering way and as a social tool. Moreover, they can help to reconstruct forgotten herstories and genealogies—against ideas of failure, anxieties, exhaustion, (self-)exploitation, precarization, and vulnerability.

But there are also the “delusions of care,” as Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung demonstrates,<sup>11</sup> when, for instance, “care” is used to hide dependencies on paternalistic power relations or degenerates into mere good intentions. Another related problem in the field is *tokenism*: “Using labels like “queer” or “feminist” to receive project funding without reflecting how queer feminist thinking should affect the structures, formats, and methodologies.”<sup>12</sup>

“The master's tools will never dismantle the master's house.”<sup>13</sup> This saying by Audre Lorde seems to be valid for most of those attempts. Departing from that and looking for different tools—what could feminist curating in dance look like? Next to a rejection of competition of capitalist, patriarchal, heteronormative stances, the need to collabo-

rate means constant learning from each other, and questioning one's own perspective, a process connected closely to "not knowing" and trust—nothing is fixed in advance!<sup>14</sup> "In the most beautiful moments, artists operate like village healers within communities, emerging around artistic programs."<sup>15</sup> What remains key in these processes is formulating questions, questioning yourself, accepting being in a weak position, allowing blind alleys, not being afraid of mistakes, provoking discussions, and accepting messiness and complexity—but at the same time making visible where you are coming from, what your starting point or your background is, and not hiding your "agenda."<sup>16</sup> A sense of reality combined with a sense of potentiality—José Muñoz's concept of queerness could thus be seen as a horizon, but also as a methodology of "queering" given paths of thinking.<sup>17</sup> Furthermore, as Silke Bake points out: "There is always a restriction in any kind of framing or context, and it might be exactly this that informs the specificity of a curatorial project. There is always a context in which we find ourselves and are acting, and this context needs to be analyzed and understood. Finally, there is me, which is already a restriction."<sup>18</sup>

## Notes

**1** Quote by Mateusz Szymanówka. For this contribution, I gave a questionnaire to three protagonists from the Berlin dance scene: Mateusz Szymanówka, artistic director of Tanztage and dance dramaturge at Sophiensaele Berlin, who previously curated at the Nowy Teatr and Teatr Studio in Warsaw and the Arts Station Foundation in Poznan; Léna Szirmay-Kalos, freelance curator, initiator and artistic director of the interdisciplinary series *Montag Modus* and co-founder of the *MMpractice* curatorial platform; and Silke Bake, dramaturge, curator, and mentor, who has worked at TAT, HAU, and TQW, and curated several programs as *Tanznacht* or *ecologies of practice*. I thank them for their inspiring input, which has substantially contributed to this article.

**2** Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (London: Routledge, 1993).

**3** Ursula K. Le Guin, "The Carrier Bag Theory of Fiction," (London: Ignota Press 2020).

**4** Donna Haraway, "Situated Knowledges: The Science Question in Feminism and the Privilege of Partial Perspective," *Feminist Studies* 14, no. 3 (Autumn 1988): 575–599.

**5** Beatrice von Bismarck and Benjamin Meyer-Krahmer: *Hospitality: Hosting Relations in Exhibitions*, Introduction, (Berlin: Sternberg, 2016), 52–59.

**6** Ibid.

**7** "Eva von Redecker, "The Assembly is dead," *The Art of Assembly*, accessed November 8, 2022, <https://art-of-assembly.net/2022/03/23/upcoming-eva-von-redecker-the-assembly-is-dead/>.

**8** Kirsten Maar and Anne Schuh, "Perspektiven auf das Verhältnis von Technik und Praxis im zeitgenössischen Tanz," in *Technologien des Performativen: Das Theater und seine Techniken*, eds. Kathrin Dreckmann, Maren Butte, and Elfi Vomberg (Bielefeld: transcript, 2020), 273–292.

**9** Beatrice von Bismarck, "Relations in Motion: The curatorial condition in visual art – and its possibilities for the neighbouring disciplines," *Frakcija* 55: *Curating in the Performing Arts* (Spring/Summer 2010): 50–57.

**10** <https://www.tanzfabrik-berlin.de/en/events/514>.

**11** Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung, *The Delusions of Care* (Berlin: Archive Books, 2021).

**12** Interview with Mateusz Szymanówka.

**13** Audre Lorde, *The Master's Tools Will Never Dismantle the Master's House* (London: Penguin Modern, 2018).

**14** Paraphrased from the interviews with Léna Szirmay-Kalos and Silke Bake.

**15** Interview with Mateusz Szymanówka.

**16** Ibid.

**17** José E. Muñoz, *Cruising Utopia: The Then and There of Queer Futurity*, Introduction (New York: UP, 2009).

**18** Interview with Silke Bake.

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**Kirsten Maar**, a dance and theater scholar and dramaturge, currently teaches as an assistant professor at the Freie Universität Berlin. Her research focuses on choreographic processes in the 20th century, demarcations between visual art, architecture, and choreography, ethics of curating, social choreographies, and gender, ethnicity, class, and identity discourses in transition. Together with Prof. Dr. Gabriele Brandstetter, she leads the sub-project *Choreographies of Intervention: Formats and Practices of Decolonization and Ecology* in the DFG Collaborative Research Center Intervening Arts; she is Principle Investigator in the DFG Research Training Group *Normativity—Criticism—Change* and researches dramaturgies in contemporary dance since 1989 together with Mila Pavićević within the framework of a project funded by the Thyssen Foundation. Publications include *Designs and Structures: William Forsythe's Choreographic Works in Their Architectural Relations* (2019), *Generic Form: Dynamic Constellations between the Arts* (ed. together with F. Ruda and J. Völker, 2017), *Assign and Arrange: Methodologies of Presentation in Art and Dance* (ed. together with M. Butte, F. McGovern, MF. Rafael, and J. Schaff, 2014).

# The Artist as Curator / The Curator as Artist

## Interview with Michiel Vandevelde Sigrid Gareis and Nicole Haitzinger

**Sigrid Gareis/Nicole Haitzinger:** As an artist, you've already dealt with curation practically and theoretically during your studies in the renowned dance training at P.A.R.T.S. in Brussels. Can you please elaborate on the conceptual background of this decision?

**Michiel Vandevelde:** I have worked as a production assistant, a technician, I've worked in the field of press and communication, I have been a distributor, an administrator, a performer, an artist, a curator, a programmer, an artist-curator. With the goal to emancipate from powerlessness, one needs to gain knowledge. It was important for me as artist to not only gain knowledge from the position of the curator or programmer, but from any other position in the field as well: all these roles are important to understand what it means to make art. One could say: it is about understanding the *apparatus* of art. Making art is not only what you see on stage; it is actually also including everything around it. And if one wants to make a change, one needs to take into account or at least be aware of the entirety of all the elements making up the artwork. In my journey of creating knowledge, I absolutely wanted to become part of an established institution. That is where the International Arts Centre DE SINGEL enters the story. I worked in the years before, together with a lot of institutions, as an artist to produce and present works, and as a freelance curator to make events and exhibitions (Kaaithheater, Het Bos, Extra City Kunsthal, etc.). But I was always an outsider, as a freelancer, working alongside institutions. To fully understand an art institution, I wanted to be "inside."

One can ask: Why? Is it merely to shift from a position of powerlessness to a powerful one? This is where my dream enters: to make a nomadic institution, similar to a circus, that travels around and anchors itself; it claims space for extended periods of times in certain contexts. A travelling arts centre, which is a school of arts at the same time (hence the reason I am also involved as a co-curator of a Master Dance in the Conservatory of Antwerp). This dream has material-

ized in very small versions in the following artistic projects: *Tentproject (a space for ideas)* (2011) and the curatorial project: *Precarious Pavilions* (2018–2019). And in order to realize this dream, I am collecting experience, a network and knowledge.

**SG/NH:** Is an "artist curator" different from a "traditional" programmer or festival-maker in the performing field? What is your personal opinion?

**MV:** In my work, I would differentiate between three roles: programmer, curator, and artist-curator. Specifically in an institution like DE SINGEL, I spent most of the time as a programmer. Programmer within an arts institution is a funny title. Most people would think of a computer programmer. And I think it is somehow close. As a programmer, you take into account a lot of parameters, and the program is for a large part a result of the balance in the parameters than of personal taste. Some examples of parameters are budget, infrastructure (presenting something in a large hall for 700 people is different from a small hall of 200 people), context (the neighborhood or city the venue is in), audience, social-cultural balances (gender, cultural background, abilities, local/international, age, etc.), history of the institution, artistic disciplines, etc. So, part of the selection you make is coming from your own preferences, but when programming, I would say 70 percent has to do with parameters beyond your taste.

As a curator, my starting point is different: I start from a specific artwork or a group of artworks that make formal and/or thematic sense together. The curatorial framework in which artworks are presented is more restrictive, but at the same time allows for more focus on a specific artist, group of artists, or subject. It is a frame that makes ideas more present and allows for more dialogue and exchange about a topic or field of topics. Often within performing arts, the curatorial frame is presented in the form of a festival or platform. Although, other than in visual arts (even though it happens there as well), one needs to be aware that in

performing arts there are two kinds of festivals: (1) festivals that are merely vehicles for communication, and (2) festivals that are genuinely occupied with the artistic processes and projects.

There is the third position as artist-curator. This is a position where your own artistic ideas come to the forefront and define the curatorial starting point. The previously mentioned *Precarious Pavilions* would be an example in which I acted as an artist-curator. Your own artistic research is expanded through the work of other artists with whom you start a dialogue.

When working for a public institution like DE SINGEL, I attempt to dissociate my position as an artist from the position of programmer or curator. Already in the agreement with the institution, it is said that none of my artistic work is presented or supported by the DE SINGEL. Of course, you are only one body of experience and knowledge, but I think one can employ a methodological difference where, as an artist-curator, you start from the “inside” of your practice and enter into a dialogue. As a programmer/curator, I start from the outside (the artists’ work) and practice *listening* as the main tool to support and present their work in the conditions that serve their work best. In the end, working in a *public* institution means I am a public servant. I think it is important to never forget that the public institution is never yours, unlike one might feel about their own artistic practice (although one could question in general what is really “yours”).

**SG/NH:** When you curate, do you consider the relationship between you and the artists you invite to be “equal”?

**MV:** The relationship is not equal, especially when working from within an established institution. Perhaps when both artist and curator are freelancers, one could argue that they potentially share a state of precarity, depending on how successful each of them is in a certain logic of the market, and therefore they could share an economic status. In any case, more importantly, in the position of the curator you make the decision of how the budget is distributed and who is invited. So, that means that the starting point is always unequal.

**SG/NH:** How has your view of the institution changed since you began working as a programmer/curator employed by an institution? Based on this, do you have any concrete suggestions for how institutions can work in a more artist-centered way?

**MV:** Working from within an institution has made me more aware about all these different parameters one needs to take into account for making a program. As a freelance artist or curator, you want to claim space. You might say that the institutions are not accessible and open for you. That is, for sure, true; most conventional arts institutions are based on selection, so not every artist gets supported or presented. At the same time, I have the feeling that recently, at least in Belgium, but I also see it in a lot of other places, that the question of *who* is presented becomes increasingly important. One could say there is an intersectional turn in the arts. The next question is how to implement this intersectional turn structurally, as a standard practice, which no longer needs to be thematized in a program brochure or festival. That is a more central question, and I have the feeling institutions fail to implement structural solutions, as it might have, for example, consequences for your own job. One solution could be mandates: one can only be on the artistic programming staff for five years, for example. In a lot of institutions, mandates exist for the directors of the institution but not necessarily for the artistic staff (programmers/curators, dramaturges, etc.) More dynamics on that level would be a way to keep the institution flexible and keep close to the process of culture-making where the rate of change is accelerating.

Secondly, formal quota (based on identity) for making a selection could be a (temporary) tool to overcome one’s biases. This is a somewhat controversial measure, as people would claim that talent can’t be bound to a quota. This kind of argument is, of course, beside the point. The problem is not that there is no talent in this or that group. The point is that whoever is making a selection always has blind spots, and a quota can remind you to simply do your work better and not rely on what you comfortably follow up on and know.

One could say that more radical measures are needed to end the model of selection. There are interesting and inspiring examples. For the moment, I am not so much involved in radical theories of how to understand an arts field without selection, yet in DE SINGEL we are implementing multiple ways of having access to the institution and what trajectory one might envelop through the infrastructure that we have to offer. How can one enter as a young (aspiring) artist, for example, or how can an artist with a long trajectory find her or his place? What are the different trajectories with which artists can navigate within an institution?

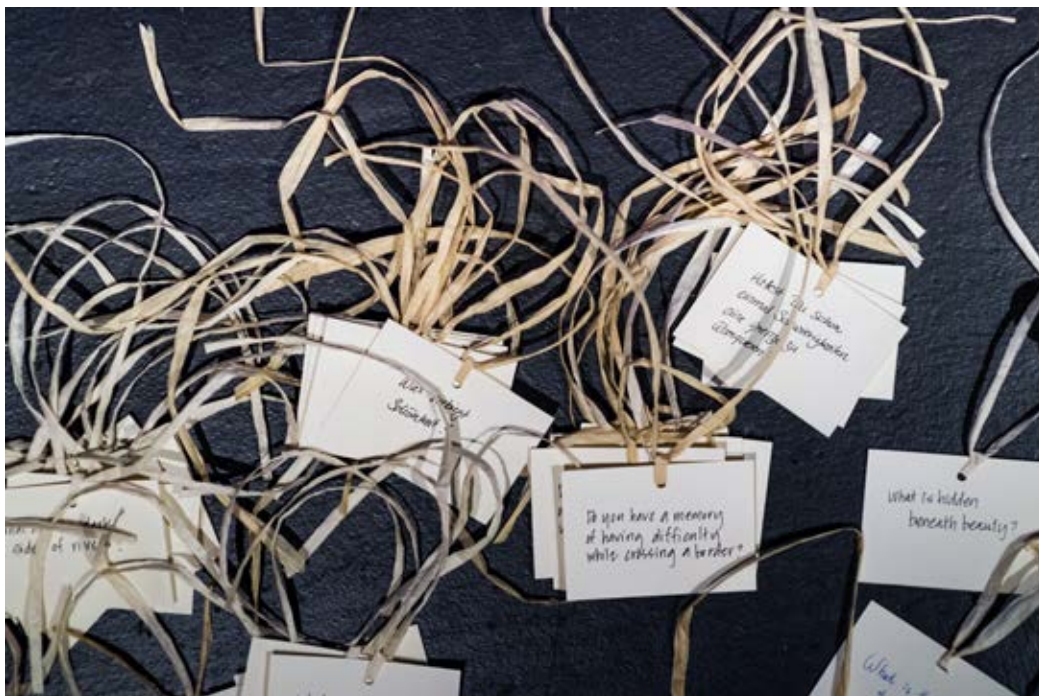


With this in mind, answering the question of how an institution can be more artist-centered has a high degree of complexity. For me, the centering is closely linked to the kind of *infrastructure* an institution is made of. I mean both the concrete architectural infrastructure and the human infrastructure. An institution that has a lot of “bricks” (building) to care for will always fail to be fully artist-centered; the building comes with its own cost and caretaking. And this will sometimes be in opposition to what artists wish for. (Large) public infrastructure comes with its own rules. In my experience, organizations with smaller or no infrastructure can often respond better to artists’ needs, as the infrastructure can be provided in favor of the artistic project. So, I think a validation of small organizations in term of budget and recognition is important. Also, the human infrastructure, those people on the payroll: their (well-)being determines how an institution is run and what is in the end possible for artists. For example, in Belgium the arts field is structurally underfinanced, which leads to a situation in which a lot of projects are run by very few people, which makes it rare that a project has the ideal focus artists wish for. The solution to the problem is simple: more adequate budgets, but the (political) reality one operates in often shatters any hope.

**SG/NH:** Could you name some parameters of a social and equitable curatorial infrastructure? What is

important for you as an artist? What is important for you as a curator? What is important for the curatorial milieu or field in general?

**MV:** When thinking from within the existing and dominant way art is presented, developed, produced, and reflected upon, it is hard to imagine a fully fair and social way of organizing the field. One can always take some measures that soften the cruelest parts, but deep down the system is what it is: highly competitive. Already, refusing awards, or getting rid of awards or festivals based on “best-of” feels like a radical gesture within such a field. One could say: there is selection in whatever professional field. But the arts are a different game; each utterance is publicly judged and criticized. So, the first exercise is to think from within this kind of arts field: how to make it more just and accessible. Often, the role of education is pointed out as an important parameter in which everyone is introduced to the art. I agree that it is important, but it is not the only parameter to rely on, and it can never be an excuse for not acting. Some possibilities I’ve sketched out earlier: mandates, quotas, more budget to redistribute, artists building awareness about the apparatus they act within, developing different structural possibilities and platforms for artists to present their work, etc. Thinking about it, these are typical ideas to fix unjust systems. Beyond that, it is always good to realize that institutions are built and made by



Sandra Chatterjee and Cynthia Ling Lee, *Back to the Beautiful (Water Memories)*, performance produced for group show co-curated by the students of the *Curating in the Performing Arts* university course, 2017, SZENE Salzburg. Photograph by: Hubert Auer.

humans. As an artist, I experienced harm from bad communication skills from programmers/curators (this is at the same time a self-critique). So, it might be as simple as acquiring skills to communicate decently with artists, to recognize their presence, even if you might not appreciate the work. I can say that only ten percent of the conversations I've had with programmers have been really interesting and confidence-giving.

Thinking beyond the existing system is when we enter the field of dreams, desires, hopes, which is always more exciting to dwell in. One dream I mentioned in the beginning is the *Tentproject*: a nomadic institution which anchors itself in different realities, where the social, artmaking, and education can potentially dissolve. A model in which the institution does not have land property but depends on the land of others. Fixed property is power and makes people conservative (conserving the building), so let's get rid of it. An arts project like this also has the potential to shift relations; the artists choose to become part of it, not the other way around, because it is a non-conventional context. Perhaps similar to the way the artists-run center PAF (Performing Arts Forum) in St. Erme (France) works: one chooses to go there; PAF doesn't choose you. A model of sharing labor, time, and knowledge, perhaps akin to our first edition of the Brussels-located Bâtard festival. In this edition, we worked for one month with all the artists on creating the festival. We ended up with "a festival as opera." Was it an easy cooperation? No, but I believe one learns most from conflicts. I am working towards an institution that is messy and anarchic, in which one is not told how something works, simply because it can always work differently, so nothing "works."

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**Michiel Vandeveld** is currently active as a choreographer, curator/programmer, technician, and producer. As a curator/programmer, he worked or works for Extra City Kunsthal, Het Bos, Bâtard festival, Precarious Pavilions, Arts Centre DE SINGEL. Vandeveld's artistic work is presented and supported throughout Europe by Kaaitheater, Münchner Kammerspiele, Platform-K, PACT Zollverein, Wiener Festwochen, steirischer herbst, STUK, Viernulvier, among others. In his work, he investigates the elements that constitute or obstruct the contemporary public sphere. He explores which other social, economic, and cultural alternatives we can imagine in order to question, challenge, and transform dominant logics and ways of organizing. He has been developing a variety of projects both in public space and in (performing) arts institutions.

# Artistic Reparations: The Curious Curation of African Contemporary Dance

## Rainy Demerson

In 2005, acclaimed Kenyan author and editor Binyavanga Wainaina wrote his sardonic work, *How to Write About Africa*. In it he instructs, “Africa is to be pitied, worshipped or dominated. Whichever angle you take, be sure to leave the strong impression that without your intervention and your important book, Africa is doomed.”<sup>1</sup> In approaching the issue of curating contemporary dance from Africa, I think of that line and ask myself: To what extent does the foreign curation of African contemporary dance rehearse this same rhetoric that Africa is inherently different than the rest of the world and Africa is to be saved? Is there a better way to curate?

Colonialism, by definition, was a process of violent theft buttressed by the establishment of systems designed to enrich the colonist by making the colonized economically dependent, despite being the actual source of wealth. I suggest that the foreign curation of African contemporary dance can perpetuate this superstructure even while it suggests or attempts to do the opposite. On the other end, many over-exploited African nations have assimilated the colonial mindset which undervalues African arts. Despite the post-independence fervour to develop the arts as a pivotal aspect of national identity, over time, many African governments have left dance artists dependent on foreign funding.<sup>2</sup> Too many African artists find their domestic governments unwilling to invest in dance as an arm of education or cultural and economic development. Meanwhile, Europe fiends for creative products from Africa, both for their intrinsic value and their “exotic” allure.<sup>3</sup> Artists across the continent want to work at home but have to work abroad, at least part-time, in order to make a living.

My aim here is not to place blame or shame on any artists or institutions who are in fact creating needed financial opportunities and often, incredible performances. Rather, I wish to shed light on a complex issue comprised of three primary dynamics of the white gaze that factor into foreign curation of African contemporary dance works.<sup>4</sup> First, there is the expectation of essential difference that emerges when artists are placed on programmes specifically for African choreographers, whilst the rest of the invitees are blended in another programme.<sup>5</sup> Then, there is the unspoken expectation that the artist translate or transform the work to suit a European audience, and lastly, an unwillingness to honour the vast and distinct differences in aesthetics amongst African choreographers and to hire them accordingly. These problematic dynamics have roots in centuries-old ideologies.

### Othering

The notion of essential difference is promulgated when, for example, European venues continue to curate festivals and programmes within festivals dedicated to the continent as if it has one unifying culture, artistic voice, or even socio-political paradigm, whereas diverse works from Europe or the USA are grouped together simply as dance. I presume this pattern of special programming was enacted to secure region-based funding for artists’ travel and visas, but this “separate but equal” policy rehearses a paradigm of essentialist difference that may be hampering artistic freedom and cultural exchange. And although it is true that this type of programming draws audiences

interested in particular cultural geographies (I have seen huge audiences come to see Cuba's Malpaso Dance Company *because* it is marketed as a Cuban company, not just an amazing one), it is also true that the artists themselves are then burdened with a type of representation not bestowed upon "Western" choreographers.<sup>6</sup> Renowned Congolese dance artist Faustin Linyekula once stated, "I speak in my own name, not in the name of 'all Congolese' or 'all Africans.'"<sup>7</sup> He had to say this because he was repeatedly being asked to represent and explain his heritage when presenting his work abroad. Since then, choreographers all over the world have made similar statements, and have criticized the failure to be curated because their work is "too traditional" for contemporary festivals but "too contemporary" for traditional or ethnicity-based festivals.<sup>8</sup> It is as if some presenters think that over 500 years of contact, conflict, and communication across cultures as a result of European colonialism would have no effect on dance, but in fact, artists everywhere are influenced by the cultural clashes in which they are enmeshed, and at the same time are individuals having deeply unique experiences that should not be thought to represent any one "typical" for their nationality. There is always the question of who *gets* to just be an artist, and who *has* to be an artist from a certain location.

### Dancing Across Borders

The burden of cultural translation is carried by African artists who are invited to perform abroad, particularly in Europe. Black bodies under European curation continue to perform the marker of difference, but the "home field" is always Whiteness, and therefore Europe always has the advantage of hosting, framing, and gatekeeping through curation. By being programmed as African contemporary dance, the work can be pigeon-holed into a set of expectations, assumptions, and limitations distinct from those any European artist might endure. These ideas are demonstrated through curation when work that conveys suffering is curated more frequently than joy or even abstraction, when exoticism is valued over sincerity, when choreography that seems to speak directly to White audiences (even when critical) is repeatedly prioritized over work that values African respondents. Although one can only appreciate art from one's own perspective, curators can and should be held responsible for engaging more deeply with the artistic communities they invest in and explore avenues for dialogue that are led by the artists' work and desires.

On the contrary, some of the most popular non-African productions about Africa seem to have skirted this responsibility when it has come to curating the creative staff. In 2008, I had the opportunity to dine with one of the European-American producers of *Fela! On Broadway*. This interdisciplinary collaboration performs the life story of Nigeria's most dangerous and internationally beloved musician/composers. It's critical to note that through this conversation, I learned that the producer was not otherwise employed in the arts but was, in fact, an oil tycoon. I nearly choked on my meal, thinking about the Ogoni people who lost their lives fighting the exploitation, pollution, and corruption of Shell Oil—a fight Fela Kuti himself took on with his lyrics! This producer explained how the choreographer was selected: the producer was having a meeting with his lawyer, and they began to casually discuss music. The producer mentioned the exciting new project he was funding, and how they were still looking for a choreographer. As it happened, one of the lawyer's clients was Bill T. Jones. Jones is one of the most pivotal postmodern/contemporary dance choreographers of the 21st century, having earned accolades such as Tony Awards, Kennedy Center Honors, a MacArthur Fellowship, and a National Medal of Arts. What he is *not* is Nigerian, Nigerian-American, or an expert or even practitioner of any form of Nigerian dance. But for the lawyer and the producer, he is an African American choreographer (who, to be fair, has choreo-

graphed for Broadway productions), and that was enough. Even a cursory engagement with the Bill T. Jones/Arnie Zane company's website would tell you that he is a choreographer with a specific lineage, set of interests, and methodology that have little to do with the Yorubá ceremonial dances or Nigerian social dances that appear in the musical. To bridge this gap, Majia Garcia, one of his former dancers who is an acclaimed Cuban American director/choreographer, was brought on as "rehearsal director." One has to wonder about the many dance artists qualified to choreograph Nigerian dances that were overlooked in favour of the one whose name brought prestige and who took little effort to find. When being of African descent and being well-known are the only requirements for under-researched curating, the project may be entertaining, even beautiful, but it will not be a fair representation of the culture, and it may not be the enriching creative collaboration that it could be for the artists. The expert knowledge and embodied experience a Yorubá choreographer could have brought from their home culture was lost. Although this was a U.S. production, there still should exist an ethical obligation to consider and in fact frame one's artistic and managerial choices mindful of how Nigerians will receive the production about one of their heroic icons, and how Nigerians could be brought into the work in positions of creative leadership.

Culturally insensitive curation can also lead to mismatched collaborations framed under the assumption that all Africans have a shared artistic voice. The interdisciplinary contemporary opera *Le Vol du Boli* purports to tell the story of Michel Leiris' 1931 theft of the sacred Boli sculpture from Mali as a metaphor for fraught European and African relations. It was first set to premier in France with choreography by Haitian contemporary dance artist Kettly Noël in 2020, but was delayed by the COVID-19 pandemic. Since then, the task of choreography, rehearsal direction, and performance was bestowed to South African choreographer Mamela Nyamza, largely known for her anti-spectacle solo and small-group work. At the Théâtre du Châtelet, one of France's largest stages, with a cast of seven dancers including herself, Nyamza was an unusual choice for the role. This speaks to the strange nature of curating African and diasporan choreographers I've witnessed in several productions globally. In the United States, when Abdel R. Salaam curated his first *Dance Africa* event in 2018, he explained to the audience at the end of the show that during his visit to South Africa, he asked his guide to bring him the best dancers from the various dance companies all over the country. Suddenly, my colleagues and I understood what was beautiful but not fully gratifying about the work. Although each performer was excellent, the work indeed lacked a sense of unity. The artists had been torn from their artistic families and merged together by an outsider giving little time to create the bond needed to present a unified force. When a producer gathers talent rather than the artists choosing themselves to work together, one has to wonder how coherent the result will be. This is of particular relevance when the performance is presenting an "African" dance to a foreign audience.

### Honouring Difference

*Le Vol du Boli* is an impressive and important work. Given the complex nature of its theme, I wonder if Africanité became a singular race through the process of curating the multi-national creative staff. Although there were several references to various countries in both Africa and Europe, the curation of the opera relied too heavily on a supposition of a shared experience amongst the Africans and another amongst the Europeans. This diminished the need for artistic collaboration to be based on a shared vision or practice—the desire to be in the room with particular people. The opera was intentionally creolizing cultures, but with only three weeks for the dance artists to prepare, the work suffered from trying to convey "Africa" in the language of one choreographer. Multi-lingual as she is, Nyamza does not speak the thousands of embodi-

ments (and their relative philosophies) of the continent. Nevertheless, in its oscillations between strained and easeful collaboration, the work beautifully demonstrated the complexity of postcolonial identity itself—neither here nor there, but both and neither. There is a colonial entanglement that ensnarls Europe, the Americas, and Africa in complex histories and wedded futures.<sup>9</sup> What can an understanding of this do for the foreign curation of African performance? Is there room for the self-determination of Africa in this relationship? Can performance be a site of anti-colonialist reparations that goes beyond the return of art objects?

### Artistic Reparations

It is my assertion that colonial nations cleanse their consciences by patronizing and curating African performance as a form of unmarked reparations (welcome, albeit inadequate) for colonial genocide and epistemicide.<sup>10</sup> When not done with care, this process can reiterate colonialist ideologies of perceived essential difference from the presenting nation, and essential sameness amongst the African nations. Difference does exist. But it is cultural, religious, economic, and political. It is not skin deep, nor is it all-encompassing. So how might the world support contemporary dance in a way that rejects, rather than repeats, this colonial paradigm?

Many treatises in decolonial theory have been written. Emotional pleas for equity have been made, but we are often left wondering what to *do*. The work of building anti-colonial paradigms is by necessity crafted uniquely by each community. The points below are incomplete and non-prescriptive. My hope is that these anti-colonial moves can be considered as part of a larger project that would include both intimate and public atonement for colonial genocide and subsequent exploitation, opportunities for in-depth and long-term investment in African-led artistic projects and transnational dialogue on reparations that recognize and build on Africa's wealth of artistic resources, rather than capitalizing on White guilt without bearing the responsibility to eradicate racism within one's own artistic organization or curatorial practice. Organizations hosting African contemporary dance artists may consider the following actions:

- Hire African curators.
- Curate programming thematically rather than ethnically.
- If your festival is organizing programmes by nation or continent, do this consistently for all, rather than having a main programme, then an annex for African artists.
- As a non-African presenter, ask yourself:
  - How do we acknowledge difference without fetishizing and capitalizing on it?
  - How do we acknowledge sameness without ignoring or oversimplifying neo-colonial violence?
  - How do we create dynamic exchanges that are mutually beneficial?
  - How do we become better listeners?
  - How might we better respond to artists rather than funding bodies when establishing categories?
  - Does framing a collaboration as reparations help identify a dynamic that can be improved by making sure the members of the global majority lead the establishment of the terms of communication?
  - Is there a way that foreign bodies can better support contemporary dance in Africa as a form of reparations that are led by the needs and desires of African artists?

There is not one singular or simple solution to the complex challenges of international dance curation. The body is an archive of cultural memory, a conduit of the imagination, and a conjuror of future worlds. Engaging artists mindfully, curiously, and humbly will begin to open possibilities for truth, reconciliation, reparations, and new avenues of equitable dance curation.

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# Twists: Dance and Decoloniality

## Jay Pather with Choy Ka Fai, Sigrid Gareis, Lia Rodrigues, and Jessica Lauren Elizabeth Taylor

### Introduction

*Twists: Dance and Decoloniality* was conceived as a multi-modal project that would systematically address questions regarding the impact of colonialism on dance and its consequences and decoloniality. It was explicitly designed to provide space for imagining more productive futures for dance especially within contemporary contexts. Under the institutional leadership of Tanzfabrik Berlin and in collaboration with leading researchers and theorists in the field, the artists Choy Ka Fai, Jay Pather, Lia Rodrigues, and Jessica Lauren Elizabeth Taylor would consider existing and persistent instances of hermetically sealed hegemonies, racism, and exclusions in the production of dance. Deeply aware of the dangers of decoloniality as another fad or trend, this research-intensive approach aimed to be rigorous and critical.

Officially launched as an international project in November 2019, the project's timeline then ran straight into the consequences arising out of COVID-19, the several lockdowns that followed, and the interruptions with international travel and gatherings. The project took to intense online sessions to continue planning the multiple outputs, such as the Symposium, as well as implementing the first output of the project, a public workshop program, with the hope that face-to-face interactions would be possible in some not-too-distant future.

Then on May 25, 2020, George Perry Floyd Jr., an African American man, was murdered by a white police officer in Minneapolis, Minnesota in the United States. As one of a string of incidents targeting Black people, the murder gave rise to several protests launched by the Black Lives Matter movement, which quickly spread to Europe, among other places in the world. Art organizations were swept into this upsurge in Europe and began issuing statements in solidarity. The organization directly involved with hosting *Twists* not only behaved very hesitantly, but also questioned the request itself. As an organization producing a forum on decoloniality, this question of solidarity at a moment of crisis arising out of the excesses and brutality of coloniality was a body blow to the core group of artists involved.

Subsequently, Jessica Taylor resigned from the project, and, in the absence of quick remedial action, the existing members questioned the veracity of the project going forward. After many attempts at trying to hold this process together, Tanzfabrik, the original hosts, asked to be relieved of this responsibility, citing a need to sort out infra-structural issues. To salvage the amount of work that had already gone into the devising of *Twists*, the project went through several re-imaginings—a stand-alone symposium, a publication, and a series of public talks were all considered by the core group—until it floundered and dissolved completely. The funding that had been acquired for the project was returned to the funders by the host.



For this publication, then, the idea of an article arose, one that introduces the breadth and scope of this fertile and potentially valuable project but in the main focuses on reflections by the original core group of individuals who curated the project as well as Sigrid Gareis, the initiator of *Twists*.

What does this have to do with curation of dance? This may seem obvious, and yet the endemic problems with the original project ask that this be spelled out. While not dealing explicitly with curation, it homes in on a crucial part of curatorial consideration—the hidden institutional blind spots and brutalities that both determine and hinder curatorial choices and pretensions of care. What is more, it leans into the notion of curation as more than a rudderless, “pure” act of artistic enquiry and excellence—as one deeply embedded in the political and ideological milieu of time and place.

So, the article, after a brief look at the scope of the project, comprises reflections obtained through interviews and organized under the sub-headings *Dreaming*, *Missteps*, and *Aftermath*.

The *Dreaming* was to tease out the initial premise of *Twists*—to go beyond the lip service doled out to issues of “diversity” and “inclusivity” and systematically approach decoloniality and dance as a series of actions. Just as it may be reductive to use the same frame that housed a realist landscape painting for a contemporary work that seeks to question representation, so too the project sought to reveal how institutional critique has to be central in our thinking about curation of dance in our contemporary worlds. This is the dreaming.

In the section on *Missteps*, we see how the clashes amounted to a bruising experience, largely reflected in the interview format which captures the immediacy of the responses. The *Aftermath* repeatedly revisits two binaries—the re-affirmation that decolonial gestures involving integrated voices—race, institution, a combination of artist voices with academia—are almost always disappointing and that this is necessary work.

*Twists* was a wonderful but failed experiment; the thesis lies in this, that the reflections by the core group, through good intentions and failure, may provide material for better curatorial choices. In an issue on the curation of dance, the article then asks for vigilance, patience, and labor—especially when curation meets decoloniality.

## Scope

*Twists* brought together current knowledges from a wide variety of disciplines and aimed to be accessible, direct, and interactive as well as sustainable—one of the project’s final outcomes was the development of manuals. These were meant to serve as a source for the various impulses and findings to be transferred to wider publics engendering discussions towards an ethically responsible approach to international entanglements in the field of dance. The following six outputs were planned:

### 1. Workshops

Following an internal sensitivity process, a series of public workshops scheduled for April 14–18, 2020 with the experts Nathalie Anguezomo Mba Bikoro, Tahir Della, Yvette Mutumba, Jay Pather, and Rolando Vázquez Melken.

## **2. Field Research at Tanzfabrik Berlin and Neighboring Institutions at Uferstudios in Berlin**

Over the course of a three-week period of field research in the fall of 2020 and an additional workshop, the artists would conduct research into (post)colonial and Eurocentrically influenced structural conditions at Tanzfabrik Berlin and (eventually) other cultural institutions situated at Uferstudios in Berlin.

## **3. Research on the Canon in Dance with the Suddenly Collective**

*Suddenly* consists of thirteen dancers and choreographers who studied together at Hochschulübergreifendes Zentrum Tanz in Berlin. They would explore the “canon” through the following questions:

What does colonization mean in terms of body, movement, choreography, and artistic work? What is being colonized, by what/whom, and how can we move beyond? What does it mean to transmit a piece from one context to another? How can we prepare ourselves to be open for such a transmission? What can the collaboration with an especially invited guest artist teach us about our own position in the context of (de-)colonization? How do our curiosities meet the curiosities of the invited artist?

Their findings would then be presented for discussion at the Symposium.

## **4. Public Symposium**

On November 7 and 8, 2020, artists and researchers in the field would be invited to a public symposium at Uferstudios in Berlin to explore methodical/theoretical as well as practical art-centered considerations for the decolonization of dance institutions.

Guiding Principles for the symposium:

- the marginalized voice should be the central one of the whole symposium;
- hierarchies and hegemonic disbalances in the structure of discussions must be avoided or even counterbalanced, and gender, age, race diversity must be secured;
- concrete impact on dance structures and concrete methods of changing institutions, not only discussing the decolonization of dance;
- reflect a practice of decolonization and not reproduce coloniality;
- symposium should not only host talks, but also practical work and include the implementation of more radical formats and transitions between different formats;
- use of a glossary to agree on a decolonized vocabulary.

Topics:

The actual symposium plan was refined and timetabled.

These are the seminal topics:

- The (Hard) Work of Decolonizing Art Institutions
- Global Solidarity/Creative Justice
- Persistence of Exotism (Post-Colonial Spirit)
- Decolonizing Knowledge
- Double Consciousness and Blackness/Invisibilizing Blackness
- Existing Differences in Privileges/Shifting Hierarchies of Power—Infrastructure and Gatekeeping
- Technology/Digitization—Decolonization/Democratization
- Critical Whiteness

### 5. Publication

A publication about the project and all its modalities was intended to be published by the end of 2021.

### 6. The Concrete Decolonization of Tanzfabrik Berlin

Implementation of the internal decolonization process by the team of Tanzfabrik Berlin itself on the basis of the artistic research process *Twists* and supported by the NGO *Diversity Arts Culture*. There was also an offer by the Bundeszentrale für politische Bildung to get subsidies for a long-term decolonization process at Tanzfabrik Berlin.

### Reflections

The exposition provided above itemizes a dense process. In this section, the core group engage in a series of reflections under the broad titles *Dreaming*, *Misssteps*, and *Aftermath*.

#### *Dreaming*

**Jay:** South African academic Mandla Mbothwe describes the state of *Ephupheni* [Xhosa for “in a dream”] as:

A place of limitless possibilities, a place of time mutation, a place of future dreaming, a place of past and future in present, of fragmentations and beautiful chaos...A place of making and tearing things apart only to remake them.  
A place of healing and teaching.<sup>1</sup>

What were your dreams as a core group member? What did you imagine would happen?

**Jessica:** I had many grand dreams with this project. And this is one of the tragedies with not being able to realize creative dreams due to institutionalized intervention, as I’ll call it for now. As Langston Hughes writes in his poem “Harlem”:

What happens to a dream deferred?  
Does it dry up like a raisin in the sun?  
Or fester like a sore--  
And then run?  
Does it stink like rotten meat?  
Or crust and sugar over like a syrupy sweet.  
Maybe it just sags like a heavy load  
*Or does it explode?*<sup>2</sup>

One of my dreams was to process the limitations of artistic institutions in community and discover working methodologies on navigating these limitations. Having come from community work where I’d been in congress with diverse pockets of several artistic sectors, I was energized by the act of processing what we would engage in regularly. By processing, I mean being in direct dialogue with members of these communities, having an exchange and feedback model that produced not only practical work but also an ever-evolving development of ideas and shared knowledges and histories that were being re-contextualized in real time.

I had big professional dreams as well. I just finished my Master’s degree and being the youngest in the group, I felt like it was an incredible opportunity to do the work that

I had been dreaming of with an admirable group of people. As a Black woman, it is important to name the fact that I was interested in professional gain because Black women in the arts so seldom get to express that desire and right: to be opportunistic. We are supposed to be humble, just happy to be in the room. So, in that respect, the institution functioned exactly as it was designed: bringing in a Black woman for diversity and then not being able to support them.

**Sigrid:** My dream was explicitly small but precise: when *Twists* started at the beginning of 2019, the political need to decolonize German art institutions was not characterized as urgent—in dance, such processes had not started properly. But there was already a certain danger that decolonization in the German context would develop into a fashionable “meta-topic.” As an anthropologist, my wish was to be as concrete as possible and not stuck in just discourse and conversations. Together with Tanzfabrik Berlin and a team of experienced artists from different continents—as well as with the support of scientists and experts—I wanted to develop as precise methods and approaches as possible for the necessary future decolonization of dance institutions in Europe. The aim of the project was not to decolonize Tanzfabrik Berlin itself, but to investigate concrete needs and possibilities for a future decolonization of this venue and establish this concrete example as a base for methods and means which other institutions in Europe could develop in a mutual learning process. In general, I expected a serious, but more humble research project. In my professional life, I have always believed that if good, engaged, and interesting people work together and if there are sincere intentions, it will work... But in this case, it didn’t work.

**Lia:** The diversity of artists’ voices, voices from different places of the world, are there saying for many years what is necessary. But I don’t think they are going to be heard. So, how can I cope with this no hope world. What dreams can I have? Then I try very much to inspire myself with people that can open a small door so I can breathe through this door. And with, for example, the indigenous voices from Brazil—as part of a group doing activism with indigenous people—hearing what they think about the world makes me breathe a little bit. Otherwise, I cannot be. I can only go on with my work through bringing very close what I say and think to what I practice. I think this is very important and very hard work because sometimes in the doing, you simply repeat models of hierarchy. I grew up in a dictatorship—what can we hope and dream in in a world like this? I try to go to these voices and practice radical listening. I also like the idea of tropical agriculture—plant everything together and then from a desert you create a forest. My dream is to apply this idea of tropical agriculture to the way I make art, that everything is connected underground. And we could apply the “twists” in many fields because I think it’s very necessary. You know, *Twists* was meant to be something alive, with topics that you apply to institutions everywhere.

Recently in our dance school, a ballet teacher used a phrase that was racist and hurtful. And she said, my God, I said something wrong, but I am not a racist. So, you cannot imagine the crisis—we are not someone that would expel her from the school; she has to be educated if she wants. So, she said, okay, I’m ready to understand what I did. With *Twists*, I don’t know what happened that we were not able to make this possible, I don’t know till now. Why? Because I’m doing this in my work in Brazil, but I saw that it was not possible in Germany.

**Ka Fai:** I think the first thing that came across my mind at that first meeting in Potsdam in September 2019 was that I didn’t know what I’m getting into. I know my limitation in terms of my articulation or writing in that sense, so I was a bit scared;

but I wanted to contribute, I wanted to try to get into the conversation, into this very chaotic and complex subject matter. It was also that this tragic process starts, and I was somewhere else. But then once we come together and settled on these various ideas on the symposium, I was quite excited and eager.

I did wonder why do I, from the Global East, or you [Jay], coming from the Global South, have to connect in Europe? Not artists from Asia talking directly to African artists. So, I was really looking forward to—and for lack of a better word—a really diverse gathering of scholars, choreographers, makers of meaning in that sense. I was always quite looking forward to that and to be as open as possible, not knowing what would happen.

### ***Misssteps***

**Jay:** What stands out for you in general/abstract terms or in specific events, as spaces of blockages and difficulty, when we tripped and struggled to move forward?

**Jessica:** Something I notice a lot of people in institutions struggle with is critique and/or a feedback model. At the moment of crisis, when we tried to bring in an intervention from the outside, it was very difficult, and it was clear that these people aren't accustomed to shifting based on the needs of every individual in the room. And that is ultimately the downfall of most rooms "in power." It's *that* moment, to truly be inclusive or shut down and therefore shut people out. Listening is key.

**Sigrid:** In general, I was surprised and dismayed that with all the problems that arose, it was not possible to clearly identify and analyze whether they were due to unclear engagements in the process, political inexperience, professional shortcomings, lack of decolonial knowledge, or personal emotional factors. This caused—one could almost say—an exponential growth of the problems we encountered.

In my opinion, the concrete starting point of our conflicts—an actual case of structural racism—could have been solved in principle by mediation and the support of the very helpful experts that had already been involved. However, it developed into a confusing and unresolvable, extremely personal struggle among the white people involved in the project—namely between Tanzfabrik Berlin and me as external initiator of the project. This whole process was overshadowed by organizational debates, insufficient internal and external communication, a permanent back and forth in argumentation, and increasing personal insecurity among individual project participants. I was aware that problems would arise—many authoritative voices on the subject justifiably stress this fact—but I was not aware that such unresolvable problems could ever appear.

The crucial thing was that it wasn't possible to establish a serious process to learn and go ahead with the problems, mistakes, or missteps that we made. We were stuck in permanent discussions about resolving the problems, but especially because of this back and forth in argumentation and, at the end, absence of a sufficient "will" of the organization—so my impression—we did not come to resolutions nor to compromises.

The misstep I felt deeply responsible for, and the reason for my impatience with my Western colleagues, was putting too much pressure in details and trusting too much and superficially the general willingness of Tanzfabrik to start this decolonization pro-

cess. I should have checked and fostered much more the involvement of the *complete* team of Tanzfabrik—and I should have been more indulgent.

On reflection, I think that such a process probably can't be initiated by an external curator—even though we had developed the structure and concept together in long, common, and fruitful discussions from the outset.

**Lia:** I blame also myself, you know, in a way because I couldn't do anything. I was not *able* to do something. Suddenly, we are out, and they are fighting with each other. And I was watching this fight among white people. This is what I saw. I am also white but in terms of being European, not, and suddenly they were fighting, and I could not understand this fight. Why? I said, no, this is impossible. This is impossible. Everything we proposed, nothing was possible. I didn't know what game they were playing finally. I felt very sad also to not be able to blow some light onto the pieces, to put everybody together.

I had this taste in my mouth that is a failure for me. It's why it's so difficult sometimes to speak about the project because it stayed in me like a failure. I'm not used to do this. I'm not used to letting something down. You fight till the end, but then this was not my fight anymore. I could not do anything, and this was very sad for me.

In my career, there was this model of European dance that needed to be in the “market.” I was not able to do this, you know, and suddenly I understood that it is the opposite that I have to do. What I have to do is not known here. But I suffered a lot because people were criticizing what you do. But what they know, I don't know. I was not able to see this in the beginning of my career, so there was suffering when I first was in touch with European presenters and artists, and I thought I'm not able to be a choreographer on this level. Then with reading my life's experiences, I understood that it's nothing like this. I could understand that I was trapped inside the system because I didn't personally prefer only white male choreographers, but I was reproducing this in my old dance festival. So, I had to really make a study and go out of this. But you need to make your own work with yourself.

In Brazil, we cannot simply say anything; you have to discuss, stop, see this and the other side. I'm always questioned as a white woman. Recently, in one incident, a dancer questioned me, and I have all these sentences in my head—that I'm not a racist, etc. So, I could hear these voices inside me, but I have to say to the dancer, you are right. I have to work on this. But inside me, there was a voice screaming, I'm not a racist. I wouldn't do anything against her. I love her, you know, all these things. But that is the work that we have to do, it's urgent.

With *Twists*, all the going back and forth with Tanzfabrik—you said this, and I think this—is so boring. Let's put all these thoughts aside and do something concrete, I felt it was so simple to us to solve. And you have these sessions, long, intense meetings for nothing. I wanted just to say, stop, just stop. Let's do this again in another way, not all this talking and writing. I don't think this led us to anything.

**Ka Fai:** When these things start to happen, you couldn't help but feel the irritation with why can't we just do things? Lia mentioned that as artists we improvise, we make, we get things done. So, we don't go through so many steps. And if there's a problem, we're just talking, we don't go to a mediator in that sense. That was this whole culture shock for me. And all this time, actually, this two and a half years, I wasn't really reflecting.

I was encountering and trying to look at or contextualize or solve a problem that was in front of us.

Then, as the time dragged out into the pandemic and the lockdown, I was also concerned about how I would survive, and it was this anxiety—when we couldn't work. Everyone was stuck somewhere else. We couldn't connect as well. There was no gathering, there was no exchange in the very real, and I learned this phrase now that I use a lot: "in real life." We couldn't do anything in real life. So, I think one of the many missteps was probably a practical reason because we were always online. We couldn't have that sort of true conversation in that sense. Really solve some problem and move ahead. And it was actually when it started to open up, first in the summer of 2021, and then this summer [2022] where I started to again engage and I met real, real people, and that is where I really had a lot of reflection, of thinking.

I didn't think of it in a more structural manner until someone mentioned it in the group that it is, in a way, a structural issue, a structural problem that is not one we can solve within one day or month or even a year. But when I started to reflect, I think maybe all parties, we all have taken wrong steps. And also, in a way, this coming together of people of such diverse backgrounds, diverse cultural upbringings, diverse working methodologies, we probably underestimated all of that. We thought we could just come together and move toward a common goal or a common vision—I felt that maybe we were just overambitious. I didn't have so much experience working with our hosts, but I have experience working with different German institutions in that sense. And I wasn't sure how they would react.

### *Aftermath*

**Jay:** What are your reflections on this experience? How can we think about what happened during *Twists* as generative, as informing how we think about curation and decoloniality?

**Jessica:** The events leading up to my decision to leave the project were deeply scarring—on a personal and emotional level—being gaslit and unsupported during such a fragile moment in Black American history, the summer of 2020. Those parts of it still sag like a heavy load. The connection with some of the core members—Lia, Jay, and Ka Fai—were the bright spots. As is usually the case, the people (and in this case, People of Color) were the ones who reached out to check in on and support one another. A valuable teaching I took with me is that this work is truly radical and must be accomplished at a grassroots level. The fulfillment I've gained from going back to be in congress with pockets of community over exhausting myself by attempting to work with the institution has been wonderfully generative.

**Sigrid:** I would very much wish that we could shape the problems we were confronted with in more abstract forms so that others can learn from it. But after having passed this very extreme process, it is still very difficult to analyze these experiences—especially to differentiate what might be systemically relevant and what was particular in our situation. Here, I do not have real answers yet—only thought-fragments from my Western perspective.

I learned from *Twists* that you only can start a decolonization process if there is a clear and common agreement that it is desired by everybody in a team. All should be aware

that it is a long, difficult, and painful process—not a temporary “project,” but a permanent, comprehensive challenge in the future work process of an institution. It should be understood that problems in this process are normal and by no means exceptional. Recognizing these problems and using them constructively for common learning and feeding processes of change should ideally follow.

It is also important to get support from the person who moderates the process and intensively sensitize and prepare everyone involved for this task. There has to be an understanding that decolonizing processes require in-depth analysis and extensive knowledge. Therefore, it is necessary (and motivating!) that all individuals involved engage with rigor (intellectually, historically, and politically) with the contexts and necessities of such a process. And, of course, I strongly advise against tackling decolonization processes as a trend—dealing with it as an interesting topic or because there is funding for it. That does not help anybody and only pretends to be social or political engagement.

Self-criticism, I see as particularly important because consciously dealing with structural racism exposes everyone involved to extreme emotions on a personal level, which, however, are of essential importance for the process. If a decolonization process is to succeed, “it has to hurt”—as Yvette Mutumba concludes.<sup>3</sup> The danger is that one becomes dishonest and manipulative towards oneself and others—especially for the white people involved who tend to use (more unconsciously) strategies of “victim blaming” in situations they have difficulties dealing with. Strong and systemic self-criticism helps to encounter it. I think *Twists* particularly failed on this point.

And especially because of the great artists involved in *Twists*, I learned that you have to be generous in this process! It is not a simple question of “right/wrong,” “good/bad,” or “correct/incorrect.” It is a common learning process where, in my opinion, the most important activity (beside accepting emotions, helplessness, or speechlessness) is to *listen*. Especially the Western people involved should avoid urging for perspectives and solutions before a situation is profoundly analyzed and—especially emotionally—dismantled. They should do their decolonial “homework” first before making a claim for care practices or even safe spaces for themselves, too.

Beside all the struggles during the process, I also got a big personal gift from *Twists*: friendship and support, which I am very grateful for! From the bottom of my heart, I must thank the artist core group—Jay, Lia, Ka Fai, and Jessica—and the process documentarians Sophie Schultze-Allen and Laura Strott as well as Sandrine Micossé-Aikins from Diversity Arts Culture, Tahir Della from Initiative Schwarze Menschen in Deutschland, the artist and curator Nathalie Anguezomo Mba Bikoro, Silvy Chakkalalal from Humboldt University, as well as Virve Sutinen and her team from *Tanz im August* in Berlin for their engagement and help in difficult times!

**Lia:** You never finish because we are always inside the system that was created by colonialism. This inequality is a result, as climate change is also inside. So, every day we must think. After this project, I saw how strong the racism card is inside us—the capitalism, the neoliberalism, they are there. I often think there is no hope, but I saw how strong those most affected are and I saw that we must go on—there is no one way to go. Paulo Freire created with the word hope, experience. Because in Portuguese we don't have a verb for hope; it is a verb of action. So, he created a word, a verb spelled and asks, how can you put your hope in movement or in action? How do you hope freedom, hope equality?



I cannot see dance separated from everything that we are doing in the world—in dance, as in language, in books, in art, you reproduce the society, what is there in terms of power, of ideas that are there. But do I think art can save the world? Why should art do this, why should dance do this as only one of the many ways to reflect what's happening? So, we don't have to save anything but reflect changing perspectives—to see what we and others are doing.

As *Twists* was ending, and when I was invited to make this portrait of mine at Festival d'Automne in Paris in 2021, I realized I didn't want to be the center of this portrait. A lot of people were around me to make it possible for me to be an artist. So, I invited ten different Brazilian artists to be my portrait. They are me. Without them, I cannot exist. In this entropic agriculture we need the diversity to be able to fertilize the earth again. I think the field of art is the same.

**Ka Fai:** In the aftermath of *Twists*, I finally could talk about my life experience after my six or seven years living and working in the German dance scene—I wouldn't dare say community—because I feel I'm not always involved. And then when I look back, even when I was with this core artist group, I realized I'm always seen or portrayed as a touring artist.

In March 2020, I gave a talk and showed one of my VR works at the tanzmesse nrw, and this question, *Am I considered a German artist?* came out and the immediate answer is no, I'm not a German artist if I don't speak the language yet. I do realize that it's the intimacy with the language that brings me to understand what is working underneath a festival institution, but a journalist commented: *Oh, he's a resident artist here, but he doesn't speak German.* That also stuck in my mind—that in a way it's very difficult to connect with the ecology.

As a migrant artist, I feel vulnerable because I couldn't get involved with much of the conversation. I was protected by a dance house (tanzhaus nrw/Bettina Massuch in Düsseldorf) and in Berlin, but in a bigger German ecology or the European dance scene, I have a sense of fragmentation. It's not directed at me, nothing personal, but there was still so much white privilege that you can just sense from a conversation. I also think that things are changing, I see a lot of a new and younger generations taking up positions of power. And that's heart-warming that there is a transition with a different generation, and maybe things in the future will be better.

Dance is unfortunately one of the most closed of all disciplines. I do straddle the visual arts as well, and working with visual art curators is different, probably in theatre as well. Why is dance so behind? It could be paranoia or fear because dance is so intimate and so direct. I mean that's also why I like to make performance, because it's very intimate, but in that intense connection in a black box, people tend to be more protective or pre-emptive.

Coloniality is like something we really didn't know because we didn't encounter it, but the current dance scene is sometimes like a parallel universe and as a migrant artist, you come and it's like, how do we find the meeting point? How do we collapse the gap to have some of that communication? I feel it's also both ways. We shouldn't take it for granted that because they are hosting this, they have the interest to work this out. We also have to learn how to communicate with them. And that's how it works. I was a resident artist in a town, and I was made to sign this form to say that I'm the best

person for the job instead of a German or European; I think they have to go through that process. Individuals might improvise; it's harder for institutions.

Recently, I was searching for Vietnamese diaspora artists, and I realized that they are embedded everywhere but missing a voice because we don't see them. We, as People of Color working in Germany, will keep our mouths not so loud, our voice not so expressive in that sense. So, maybe then people are already in place—it's just that that's no way to allow or to encourage them to express an individuality. And that, maybe, is decoloniality for me.

I was introduced to this book called *Eure Heimat ist unser Albtraum*<sup>4</sup> [Your Homeland Is Our Nightmare] about this German idea of a "Heimat" [homeland] to immigrants. I've just started to encounter and research this. These experiences touch on the more hidden and nebulous horrors of institutional exclusivity. I also experienced this a lot, but it's really the bureaucracy. There is a lot of improvisation for an individual, but as an institution, it's still not so easy to improvise in that way.

In the aftermath, I thought I must put this whole thing behind me. Looking back, I'm seeing things that I experienced myself. But I question what the best way is to reflect this. Is it like a movie poster without the movie? It's quite abstract for me to understand everything I felt. Am I just touching the surface? The best way is just sharing my experience and what I feel. And this is enough because then it would not be didactic; it just reflects on our experience working with Tanzfabrik.

And today, when I was just looking at all of this, I feel maybe even with Tanzfabrik—what I know of them: just going to their space, looking at their program, and how they felt that they are one of the most open institutions that we could work with—that it goes much deeper: To maybe critique dance as a discipline for answers, rather than an institution or any sort of nationality.

I hope that our failed attempts help someone in the future to continue working within this context. That's the hope in there.

## Conclusion

Dance can be viewed as the most obvious art discipline to hold with complexity and nuance the decolonial discourse because coloniality is so much about bodies—whether those bodies are invested with power or divested of power, whether a body was marked superior on account of the color of their skin, the texture of the hair, or inferior based on the color of their eyes or the size of their hips—coloniality rationalized its voraciousness largely on the basis of bodies, their form—and their pigmentation. When one curates or experiences bodies in motion that are seemingly oblivious of the colonial discourse they perpetuate, the experience especially for People of Color is extreme, because the persistence of colonial imaging on the body can be so vivid, disarming, and disabling.

Further, dance implies an embodiment, a knitting together of comforts and discomforts with political systems, a visceral translator and barometer of all that threatens or nurtures the body—through its skin, its flesh, its kinesthesia, its anxieties, its placement in space, its congruence with an outside rhythm, its ease or dis-ease, its talking through internal and external flux. We saw this with the kind of work that emerged in the pandemic the world has just experienced. So, indeed, if a social system is being

purged of and seared through with murders of Black bodies, protected by whiteness, then the body, all bodies (the individual body, the collective body, or the institutional body) and not just Black bodies, should be this conduit and register in some form this precarity.

Yet, of all the art disciplines, dance has recurred as a discipline seemingly the most outside of addressing colonial inheritances and continuities, something *Twists* sought to address in a multimodal, layered way. Dance about issues of feminism, queer politics, gender, and race have no doubt emerged, but less so for rigorous intersectionality and an awareness of how systemic prejudices around class, race, gender and sexual orientation conspire to produce atmospheres of trauma. Further, representing these issues on stage is one thing, meticulously enabling these issues, especially those of race, to inform infrastructure and institutions to talk about action and not just representation is quite another.

Ultimately, the call from the architects and thinkers of decolonial discourse to interrogate the colonial foundations of modernity is something that is much, much more than simply the representation of racism as a theme or subject on stage.

As Rolando Vázquez Melken implores:

Decoloniality is inspired by the struggles for autonomy of first nations; that is, the struggles for dignity. These are not struggles to become modern or being recognised as such, but rather to claim the right to constitute one's own world and horizon with dignity and autonomy.<sup>5</sup>

These were some of the issues that *Twists* attempted to address with participants across a range of backgrounds, to allow for a depth of interaction and possibilities for real transformation.

Over three years ago, *Twists* as a title was seen as remarkably apt for a project about decoloniality and dance. The idea behind a twist is its unexpected, heady, sometimes dizzying bends that threaten to break but are after all a bend—a pause, a deceleration maybe, but not a stop; a turn or a swerve not a reversal to nothing, an adaptation rather than obliteration. It was a well-advised title for a complex subject at a complex time informed by the pervasiveness of 500 years of coloniality. Met with difficulties within infrastructure, this very necessary project bent and shifted and attempted to accommodate the shortfalls and absences. New propositions were developed and dropped amidst difficult words, actions of racism, infrastructural limitations, and heavy hearts. So many decolonial and anti-colonial projects, especially those that have been started by predominantly white institutions, run into difficulties with the superficiality with which the content is handled, with infrastructure that cannot hold the weight and gravitas of what is being asked for and/or of a haphazardly envisioned group of people who are unable to sustain the ethical requirements of such a project. *Twists* imagined itself to be different, as the interviews above reveal. The experience, despite so much prior consideration, was ruptured and some of the hows and whys are probed above.

These reflections as a way of contributing to the space left empty as a result was not to simply piece together what might have happened but to genuinely connect *Dreaming* with *Aftermath* via a reflection of the *Missteps*. Members of the core group then employed methods of reflection as generative of something that could grow out of a healthy dose

of realism—how to be, for example, productively analytical without making meaningless accusations or fault finding. This has produced afterthoughts by the four interlocutors that may be construed as heavy and ponderous.

However, the ebb and flow of optimism in the various suggestions for future curation of such a project dominates, based on an abiding and strong belief in the possibilities of change. So, we do indeed end with something that we started with, wiser perhaps but no less diminished in awareness of the centrality and rich possibilities of these considerations in curation specifically and generally in art institutional development. As global events continue to demonstrate, the curation of such projects is crucial for equity, redress, and restoration of dignity, but also for innovation and growth in compositional choices for dance and its curation, as much as for the organization, dissemination, and infrastructural development of this evolving form.

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## Notes

- 1 Mandla Mbothwe, “Proposal for Renaming the Workshop Building” (unpublished article; University of Cape Town/Hiddingh Campus, 2000).
  - 2 Langston Hughes, *The Collected Poems of Langston Hughes*, eds. Arnold Rampersad, David E. Roessel (New York: Knopf, 2007).
  - 3 Pablo Larios, “Yvette Mutumba on Why Decolonizing Institutions ‘Has to Hurt,’” *Frieze*, July 6, 2020, accessed October 20, 2022, <https://www.frieze.com/article/yvette-mutumba-why-decolonizing-institutions-has-hurt>.
  - 4 Fatma Aydemir and Hengameh Yaghoobifarah, eds., *Eure Heimat ist unser Albtraum* (Berlin: Ullstein Verlag, 2019).
  - 5 Rolando Vázquez, “What We Know Is Built on Erasure,” *The Contemporary Journal* 1 (January 25, 2019), accessed November 10, 2022, <https://thecontemporaryjournal.org/strands/on-translations/what-we-know-is-built-on-erasure-an-interview-with-rolando-vazquez.5>.
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**Jay Pather** is a curator, choreographer, and academic. He is Professor at the University of Cape Town where he directs the Institute for Creative Arts. He curates the *Infecting the City* Public Art Festival and the *ICA Live Art Festival* in Cape Town and *Afrovibes* in several cities in the Netherlands. He has co-curated for the French Season Africa 2020/21 and Spier Light Art/Stellenbosch. Choreographic work includes re-imagining Shakespeare’s *Julius Caesar* at the Johannesburg Stock Exchange and Stravinsky’s *Le Sacre du Printemps* in Maboneng. A book about his work by Ketu Katrak, *Jay Pather and Spatial Politics*, was published in 2021. Recent publications include articles in *Changing Metropolis II*, *Rogue Urbanism*, *Performing Cities*, *Where Strangers Meet* and a book that he edited called *Acts of Transgressions, Live Art in South Africa*. He has served as juror for the *International Award for Public Art*, as Board Member of the *National Arts Festival* of South Africa, member of the *TURN Fonds 2* jury and was recently made *Chevalier des Arts et des Lettres* by the French Government.

**Choy Ka Fai** is a Berlin-based Singaporean artist. His multidisciplinary art practice situates itself at the intersection of dance, media art, and performance. At the heart of his research is a continuous exploration of the metaphysics of the human body. Through research expeditions, pseudo-scientific experiments, and documentary performances, he appropriates technologies and narratives

to imagine new futures of the human body. Choy Ka Fai's projects have been presented in major institutions and festivals worldwide, including Sadler's Wells (London, UK), ImPulsTanz (Vienna, Austria), and Tanz im August (Berlin, Germany). He was the resident artist at tanzhaus nrw in Düsseldorf (2017–2019) and at Künstlerhaus Bethanien in Berlin (2014–15). Ka Fai graduated with a MA in Design Interaction from the Royal College of Art, London, United Kingdom.

**Sigrid Gareis** is a curator and, since 2017, co-director of the university course *Curating in the Performing Arts* at the Paris Lodron University in Salzburg in cooperation with Freie Universität Berlin and Ruhr-University Bochum. After studying anthropology, classical archaeology, and ancient history, she built up the departments of performing arts and international cultural work at the *Siemens Arts Program* in Munich. She was co-founder of dance and theatre festivals in Moscow, Munich, Nuremberg, and Greifswald. From 2000 to 2009, she was founding director of Tanzquartier Wien and, from 2005 to 2007, founding president of the *European Dance House Network* (EDN).

As secretary general, she established the Akademie der Künste der Welt in Cologne in 2012. As a curator and dramaturge for dance and theatre, she works for, among others, Wiener Festwochen, Haus der Kulturen der Welt, ZKM, and the Kölner Philharmonie. She is member of numerous juries (e.g., Culture – Creative Europe Programme, Hauptstadtkulturfond, and Allianz Kulturstiftung) and initiated two symposia for curation in the performing arts (2011 *Beyond Curating* in Essen, 2015 *Show me the world* in Munich). She is featured in various book publications.

**Lia Rodrigues** is a well-known Brazilian choreographer. She studied classical ballet and history in São Paulo. From 1980 to 1982, she was a dancer in the *Compagnie Maguy Marin* in France. When she returned to Rio de Janeiro, she founded the *Lia Rodrigues Companhia de Danças* in 1990 and in 1992 the *Panorama Festival*—the most important festival for contemporary dance in Brazil—which she directed for fourteen years. Since 2004, her Company has been based in the Favela da Maré in Rio de Janeiro where she has been involved in developing educational and artistic activities in partnership with the non-governmental organization *Redes de Desenvolvimento da Maré*. At this favela, they opened the *Centro de Artes da Maré* in 2009 and the *Escola livre de Danças da Maré* (Free Dance-School of Maré) in 2011. The artistic pieces that she develops with her company are shown at renowned festivals and theatres. She was awarded the medal of *Chevalier dans l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres* by the French government in 2007, and the *SACD Prize for Choreography* in 2016, and the *Prince Claus Award* in the Netherlands in 2014. In 2020, she was named *Choreographer of the Year* in Germany and France.

**Jessica Lauren Elizabeth Taylor** is an artist, filmmaker, writer, and community organizer. Her roots are in the Southern United States, born in Mississippi and bred in Florida on former Timucuan land. Taylor's work manifests through text, dialogue, and video. Her work centers on themes of ritual, social politics, and identity mythology of Black and Indigenous folks. She is chiefly concerned with the creation of racial equity in art and theater. She has performed and presented work at the Barbican Centre of Art (London, UK) Chisenhale Gallery (London, UK), Hebbel Am Ufer (Berlin, Germany), Kunst-Werke Institute for Contemporary Art (Berlin, Germany), Sophiensaele (Berlin, Germany), The Astrup

Fearnley Museum of Modern Art (Oslo, Norway), and National Museum of Norway (Stavanger, Norway). Taylor has been a resident at Tate Modern and the Irish Museum for Modern Art. Her writing has been commissioned by *Vogue Germany*, Haus der Kunst, and the Hamburger Bahnhof exhibition catalogue. She hosted and moderated the salon series, *Black in Berlin* until 2017. Her film, *Muttererde*, a series that calls for femme forms of ancestral history, has been screened in over ten countries. Taylor is based in Oslo, Norway.

# Nurturing the Relational Body: Decolonizing Dance Pedagogies

## A conversation between jackī job and Rolando Vázquez Melken

The overwhelming emphasis on the representation of the body asks us to look more closely and critically at assumptions of the body in the ways in which we teach and perform dance. Following this, perhaps more productive curatorial strategies can emerge.

### Ways of Seeing to Recover the Relational Body

**jackī job:** Most dancers feel that their technique makes them feel safe and capable, even becoming a measurement of their worth. With reference to my class, which introduced principles of Butoh, one dancer mentioned how the exercises “made space for deep introspection and observation.” Yet, it also made them feel extremely anxious and physically uncomfortable. This is interesting, as you and I were talking about the relational body and how Western dance shapes the body very specifically, dictating a particular form that has to be safeguarded and upheld. As my methodologies have no obvious Western point of reference, they are often described as requiring no physical technique, yet, somehow, deeply impress on both conscious and unconscious levels. I often talk about the body as having multiple centres—a dancer I worked with referred to pain radiating out from the sides of their body, as if they are unconsciously becoming aware of their peripheries.

**Rolando Vázquez Melken:** Maybe what you do in your pedagogy is uncover other forms of being in a body, instead of treating the body as representational, or merely a technical body, an anatomical body. If you could provide some detail on the principles or techniques that you use in teaching, such as the body with multiple centres, the peripheral gaze, and the sensing of corners, then we can begin to unravel that search for recovering a relational body that has been erased or disabled by the normative anatomical body. Which body lies under the pretended certainties of representation?

**jj:** I define technique as the body’s ability to manifest what the mind is imagining. One of the Butoh principles I use is related to how we see. It aims to find multiple

eyes all over the body, as well as develop a sense of their peripheral vision. The exercise begins with closed eyes, and a sense of looking into the corners. My next prompt would be to peer around the corner and allow the body to follow that intention. After a short while, everyone opens their eyes minimally to prevent them from bumping into things. Usually, everyone moves very uneasily and feels unfamiliar sensations in the body. I then relate the term “seeing” to 1) having vision, and 2) to understand. By extension, therefore, as soon as we start looking peripherally, we begin to understand things that are not directly in front of us. We begin to relate to things that are not obvious and are reminded that it merely requires a shift in our focus to make this connection.

On reflection, participants are often aware of multiple sensations, as well as a measure of discomfort. At this point, I mention the importance of tension, and how states of attention necessitate tension. If the tension between two different parts pulling away from each other is released, they collapse on each other and their difference is not noticed. Difference and the importance of moving through tension thus becomes important. Philosophically, we need to think through things differently to understand and see the world differently. And then, for me, we begin to develop a technique that manifests deep connections between the imagination and the body, and pays attention to the multiple lateral connections that lie in between. But of course, these exercises merely tickle the surface. I have been getting frustrated as people sense the difficulty of sustaining principles of difference, tension, and peripheral vision. This kind of work requires endurance, and that, I believe, frightens people.

**RVM:** One of the most important methodological principles of decolonial thinking is coming from Black feminism and has to do with positionality. In a way, positionality is a response to the claim of abstraction of the dominant position of enunciation; the self-centred and sovereign self. How can we accept being placed in bodies without position? How can we live a life of separa-

tion and indifference. I am thinking about this abstract body that is just a form and a representation, and not the body that is in position, or, in relation to others and to the multiple selves. It seems like this practice in your teaching of transforming the ways of seeing of the body and going beyond the central gaze and opening other forms of perception into the multiple eyes has to do with the idea of the multiple self that Maria Lugones<sup>1</sup> speaks about.

And I am thinking, how can we exit that single self that we are forced into being and inhabit a multiple self that may pursue different things at the same time, and also inhabit different times? How do we experience different times in one time? I think this pedagogy of seeing through multiple eyes is an experiential practice of that multiple self because you might be able to perceive things in the periphery that don't come from your dominant mind, or in the case of the dancer, through conventional technique. Rather, it comes from other forms of perception and understandings that are not necessarily vocal or trained but are also part of who we are capable of being with others. So, one of the things I wonder is how that multiple self is embodied in other forms of perception to create possibilities of movement and connection.

**jj:** Imagining multiple selves is a very interesting concept, especially as the body is physically configured in a particular way. But with imagination, we need not be limited to that configuration. I have an exercise that finds the lion's power within ourselves. I talk about the sense of power that the lion has but does not show off. When it looks all relaxed lying under a tree, its power is hidden. Similarly, we can try to hold power without having the need to put it on display. In the exercise, the body is balanced between the balls of both feet and the hands on the floor. The knees are slightly raised, with the head hanging in between the two arms, giving the impression of walking with four limbs. The exercise seems simple, but once we begin to move at various tempi, it requires a fair amount of strength and concentration. I insist that the abdomen region is held inwards and towards the back. One has to get oneself out of the way, in order to move forward. So, in thinking about imagining multiple selves, I consider what the lion is teaching me about being in power.

## The Teachings of Material and Animate Worlds

**RVM:** As you were talking about the lion, perhaps you could talk about the power you learned from the praying mantis in your performance *And Then...*

**jj:** I learnt to relinquish the self. As a dancer, this means letting go of Western representations of dance that celebrates the body through balance and being upright. Relinquishing the self creates a different kind of vibration within the body and activates a power that would ordinarily remain invisible, thereby revealing an unconventional quality and strength in performance.

**RVM:** I am also interested in how your pedagogical practices are moving from training a body to be in space as an abstract form, to the training of the body to be in a place. Instead of the body being the centre of space, I think you are speaking of that place that is hosting the body, thereby setting the body in a place that is broader than the self, and has peripheries, corners, margins, and opacities. You are shifting the body that is self-centred and secure in the abstraction of space, into a place that is constructed of things beyond the body, and that connects to all those realities that elude the central gaze. And this body that senses that there is much more than that self-certainty or abstraction of space, is a body, as you call it, in attention. This also means being in tension or entering the tension of attention. For me, that tension that you are speaking of is about our relation to difference. So, how can we be with difference instead of remaining in the in-difference of the sovereign self, of its being as representation, as form in space?

**jj:** There is another simple exercise I do at the start of a class which aims for people to sense the space as being alive, and thus, ever-changing. Holding an ordinary cleaning cloth in their hand, I guide them into a posture similar to the lion exercise. Instead of cleaning the floor, I ask for a mindful clearing of the space, so as to find a place for themselves within it. This creates an awareness of the complexities of the space itself and the air that inhabits it. If one is asking for permission to be in the space, it loses its abstraction. In terms of dance, a different sensitivity develops as it becomes impossible to boldly leap across the floor. Perceiving meaning in the material world is especially enhanced when the notions of multiple eyes and peripheral vision are applied to this exercise. Nothing can be taken for granted, and a wonderful relationship that brings attention to how one attends to elements in the world begins. If the space itself has multiple entities, then you will touch it differently. Touch then moves from being manipulative or



requiring evidence of things that are obvious. For me, to cause something else to touch me and move through me creates a lovely sensation in the body that takes me away from an egotistical self. This comes back to how the relinquishing of self opens oneself up to the vibrational frequency of what may otherwise be thought of as being inanimate.

**RVM:** There are so many things to talk about. One has to do with the post-anthropocentric. For many, anthropocentrism is a way to understand that there are non-human actors. I think it does some of that, but still remains far away from the idea of what we can learn from, for example, in relation to insects, as you are doing. This connects to cosmovisions and philosophies in which insects and animals are considered our ancestors and our teachers. Learning the language of movement of insects is a kind of connection that is beyond this Western invention of the human. It is a deep relation to other forms of life that connects us to other vibrations of life. So, for example, in your performance, you had all these branches that you collected intuitively and then put them in the scene. The mantis made that connection between the moving human and the branches evident. It was as if the mantis had learned these vibrations from the trees, and then you in turn, learnt that vibration from the mantis. Raimon Panikkar<sup>2</sup> speaks of vibration as being one of the principles of life. Yes, I think you sense that connection with the relation to the insect's power that touches you and that is in turn transmitted through you.

**jj:** For me, a vibrational connection is being touched by something else.

### Transforming by Touching the Invisible

**RVM:** I would like to talk with you about how the act of offering is the reverse of consumption. While we have been fixated on consuming the world, we have lost the capacity of offering. I think that the movement of relinquishing the self that you speak of is connected to the capacity of offering. It allows for the relation to enter into that place of vibration and honouring. It moves into that place of care, of the intimacy of touch, that is not a selfish gesture of appropriation, but that is selfless. Overcoming the self<sup>3</sup> is a strange type of transformation. It is not the transformation into something that you want to be, but that of stopping to be that thing which you have been made to be.

**jj:** My performance in *And Then...*<sup>4</sup> is quite meditative, as you know, and it feels like everyone and everything is

also affected by a vibrational energy. Audiences are either quiet or emotional. Often, tears are shed and in trying to find a reason for their emotions, they relate traumatic experiences or remember something of their childhood. Like you are saying, we inhabit these bodies that we have been made into, and then it is as if the body itself begins to remember something else that is only perceived peripherally. It can only be sensed when we embody other ways of seeing and understanding the world. As those principles are applied in the way I craft my dance, this kind of vibration happens in performance and is also a real and practical way of being in the world.

**RVM:** That has to do with the question of being touched. So, when the audience is not just seeing as a spectator that is consuming an image, but being touched, there is a moment of remembrance, of weaving-in and weaving-back. It brings about a memory that is not there in the amnesic condition of the spectator. This moment of touch is a key moment of connecting, of the weaving of relations.

I was also thinking about the question of multiple eyes and its connection to listening. Can we think of the technical use of the multiple eyes as a training for listening? I use the term listening not just for the ears, but as shifting from the logic of gaze into the logic of reception. This creates an opening towards the difference and multiplicity that is all around us. Instead of the consuming gaze of the spectator, listening opens a peripheral reception of the times that hold us, and that in holding us, calls upon us.

Finally, let me say a few words in relation to offering, and what you referred to as opening up place. Or, what I would call, the making of place. So, the exercise where you open up place, instead of taking, invading or controlling the space, is a mode of offering, it is a way in which space is practiced as a place for the hosting of others, the hosting and weaving of difference. It is a place where offering, relinquishing, and being touched can happen. It is a place where memories can come and be hosted, instead of merely being a space of representation. I think that turning out of the order of representation is present in your work.

**jj:** What is interesting about listening is how hearing is heightened when one cannot see. I have an exercise where one person stands with their eyes closed and allows another to look at them. I then ask them to allow a similar gaze from the space itself. We then begin to

play with a sense of closing and opening the body's multiple eyes whilst the space gazes back. Then, another kind of listening starts to happen. It is as if the soul is aware of other vibrations. This makes sense as hearing is the vibration of little hairs rapidly beating against each other deep inside the ear. Soul listening is felt inside the body, as well as on the skin, and everything becomes alive. We have so much potential within ourselves when we realize that we are not just this body. When we embrace this realisation, the potential for intimate relationships with other humans, our children, families and with society become wide open. There are so many possibilities, and everything becomes creative and filled with imagination. Everything becomes play and has a quality of lightness.

### Recovering Joy Through the Relational Body

**RVM:** Maybe we could close with a reflection on how the opening towards a relational body is also the opening towards a body that is capable of joy in the way of play. Maria Lugones<sup>5</sup> speaks about how the notion of games in the West has to do with competition and who wins. Whereas here, the notion of joy and play is about the enjoyment with others that you cannot have on your own. So, we can understand the relational as a

form of recovering the joy of life and, for me, something that is key here as well, is in the relinquishing of what I would call, the suffering self. Relinquishing this normative self that seems to be so powerful, that everybody has to attain to be recognised as human and dignified. In relinquishing that desire to become that normative self, in order to be human, there is a great freedom. It is that freedom of being, of we-ing with difference by connecting to more than the humanness. That freedom of being able to open places, so that places can host you, and embrace you, and to recover the joy of life. It is not about being seen and consumed. It is about touching and transforming others. There is deep hope in the search for pedagogies of decolonizing dance that search for the multiple relational body.

**jj:** It is also important to allow the offering of others, so there is this perpetual sense of acceptance and offering, where the energy constantly shifts and moves us into another place.

**RVM:** Yes, you enter a grammar of reception, which is different from the language of exchange. The trade, knowledge, and aesthetic economies of the West are always economies of exchange, the exchange of "equiva-



jacki job, performance of *And Then...*, 2020. Photograph by: Rob Keith.

lence.” We seem to apply that to our personal relations, too. Instead, a sense of offering implies opening space and being in that vibration of co-existence in which the relational is what makes possible the joy of life.

**jj:** Yes, this relinquishing of the self brings joy.

**RVM:** The struggle for freedom is not to gain control over the means of power. The struggle for freedom is to regain our relational selves and the possibilities of joy.

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## Notes

**1** Maria Lugones, *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes: Theorizing Coalition Against Multiple Oppressions* (Lanham: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2003).

**2** Raimon Panikkar, *The Rhythm of Being: The Unbroken Trinity* (Ossining: Orbis Books, 2013).

**3** Rolando Vázquez, “Salir del Sujeto,” in *Decolonialidad y psicoanálisis*, eds. María Amelia Castañola and Mauricio González (Mexico City: Editorial Navarra, 2017), 49–70.

**4** jackī job, “Re-imaging Race through *Daai za Lady & Butoh*,” in *African Somaesthetics: Cultures, Feminisms, Politics*, ed. C.F. Botha (Leiden: Brill, 2021), 60–78.

**5** Lugones, *Pilgrimages/Peregrinajes*.

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**jackī job** is a dancer and choreographer, theatre-maker, director, producer, and academic researcher at the University of Cape Town. Her PhD animates and philosophically analyses a personal oeuvre which in its crafting, expands the meaning of personhood and transformation in “post-apartheid” South Africa. The academic translations of her performance processes have been published in journals related to feminist decolonial discourse, soma-aesthetics, philosophy, theatre and Butoh.

**Rolando Vázquez Melken** is a teacher and decolonial thinker. Vázquez Melkeb is currently Associate Professor of Sociology at the University College Utrecht. Since 2010, he co-directs with Walter Mignolo the annual *Maria Lugones Decolonial Summer School*. His most recent publication is *Vistas of Modernity: Decolonial Aesthetics and the End of the Contemporary* (Mondriaan Fund 2020).

# Choreography as Curation, Curation as Cure

## Amanda Piña

I speak in the plural instead of using the singular pronoun to invite you, reader, to listen to us, Women of Color, working and existing between worlds, or maybe to find yourself reflected as one of us, sharing experiences of art, migration, and diaspora.

We, Mestizas,<sup>1</sup> Cheje,<sup>2</sup> artists of mixed heritages and diasporic perspectives, have been painfully aware of the way in which Western art institutions in Europe or in the colonies have been traditionally part of the brutal pedagogies of Western modernity. Long before the blooming of decolonial discourse, we have felt this brutality in the flesh. We have nevertheless carried the places, mountains, forests, rivers, and pampas that once were home within our bodies to the so-called Global North. Drought, armed conflict, and the effects of the extractivism that fuels the Global North with wealth are part of the luggage we brought here. But also, the experience of other worlds of art and life, the memories of spaces in which the monoculture of the mind, its social and biological manifestations were not yet present.

### Forest Monoculture

The brutal aspect of that set of values and systems of inclusion and exclusion, we here call pedagogies,<sup>3</sup> can be expressed in the image of forest monoculture: brought by European settlers to Latin America during the last 500 years, those monoculture forests (which are in truth plantations) are a manifestation of the monoculture of the mind that Western modernity has traditionally expanded through many different tentacles, Western art being one of them. They resemble a forest and appear as diversity, yet only one or two species are fostered.

The difference between a real forest and a monoculture plantation is something between ten species (plantation) to 1,000 (forest). Plantation forest monoculture's main point is the extraction of wealth derived by the transformation of vegetal life through logging into oil, timber, or cellulose, and its existence in the south of Abya Yala [the American Continent] has continued to this day, in the desertification of the soil and the dispossession of indigenous communities from their communal lands, water reserves, and ancestral ties to their territory.

The monoculture of the mind has to do with the expansion of one world and with the destruction of alter-worlds, through extraction and enclosure. It is the monoculture of the mind that produces climate change. The Anthropos in the Anthropocene is that one world of sensing and meaning.

Engaging with artistic or curatorial practices for us has to do with allowing counter-worlds to exist, by enacting practices of re-membering, invoking, and embodying, and by proposing curatorial contexts that collectively practise those worlds, acknowledge and give them space to exist. To work with performance, in relation to those worlds, has to do with bringing them to live in the here-and-now, collectively proposing other ways of dealing with time, space, and with each other and others. This approach to art and curating is strongly influenced by a study of Amerindian practices from a perspec-

tive which does not reduce them to cultural belief but encounters them as practices of worldmaking and world-creating in the now.

### **Curing through Curating**

Indigenous ontologies from the Wixarika<sup>4</sup> tradition of thought and practice propose curing [*cura o curación*] as a form of healing without need for disease. It is not an individual form of healing engaged with the self but collective endeavours of strengthening and blooming<sup>5</sup> together in a communal relation which involve humans and others alter- or counter-worldling, practised through ritual music, dance, and performance can be understood as curing since it proposes a form of conviviality which can prevent societal as well as individual disease. Our Wixarika teacher, indigenous elder Juan José Ramirez Katira, taught us about curing: “To cure is to support well-being before we or the world get ill, it is important to give continuity to curing, to offering, to dance and to ritual to strengthen ourselves in order to bloom.”<sup>6</sup>

The form of knowledge mastered by Ramirez is transferred orally and through embodied practices such as ritual offerings, dance, oral narration, and song. Its form of knowledge is performative and an arts-based happening through identification. The Ancestral knowledge of ritual dancing and sacred chanting present in Wixarika cultural practices, in relation to the ingestion of plants in ceremonial context, teaches forms of offering and ritually acknowledging of the maintainers.<sup>7</sup> These practices can be regarded as artistic and political forms or orientation in relation with other humans, with bodies of water, of earth, animals, people, and plants. Friendship and collective sense making are practised as a way of strengthening individual and collective bodies for blooming together.

In Ivan Illich’s institutional critique, he analyses the way in which certain institutions invert the relation between means and aims, becoming aims in themselves. Mestiza artists curate on the basis of conviviality as proposed by Illich and of Sumak Kawsay [the plentiful life], proposed by indigenous thought and practice in the Andes. We think of artistic practices as tools that can be distributed equally to a diversity of peoples and communities. Our concern is a heart and a spirit that moves our doings. We are always smugglers. We speak to European, Canadian, or U.S American audiences, as we are always also talking with the ones at home. Working also for them, we represent them here.

### **Choreography as Curation**

When one choreographs a dance or a situation, one starts by gathering people together, and in this way pre-proposing a living texture or environment from which the work-world will emerge. Curating people who come together is then a very common practice embedded in choreography, proposing a possibility of arranging relations and relationships by attuning to the emergence of a particular kind of collective.

*The School of the Jaguar* and *The School of Mountains and Water* are two of our projects and contexts in which the choreographic and the curatorial merge.<sup>8</sup> Both contexts are proposals as a form of rehearsal of an Ecology of forms of knowing, a diversity of voices. A place for counter- and alter-worlds of sensing and meaning to exist and to be practised collectively.

*The School of the Jaguar*<sup>9</sup> deals with the relation between humans, animals, and vegetables within Amerindian traditions of knowledge, art, and iconography. It proposes a safe space in which different forms of knowledge can enter in dialogue without the

habitual hierarchies between them. It includes discursive, practical, pedagogical and performative spaces that co-exist within an installation. It includes a diverse group of people (among them are indigenous elders, artists, and scientists from different origins and disciplines) that take part together with the participants (students and the general public) in a process of unlearning modern universalism.

*The School of Mountains and Water* is a curated context around a performative walk in the mountains. The whole context includes discursive, pedagogical, and artistic practices from different origins and disciplines gathering around the idea of recognising mountains as living bodies active in the re-production of water. Both contexts are choreographic and curatorial at the same time. In them, we curate people around a topic and also encounters that can bring about a mutual strengthening of perspectives, intuitions, and propositions and blooming of the experience of being-with.



Amanda Piña, performance of *Frontera / Procesión – Un Ritual del Agua*, 2022. Photograph by: Christian Vignal. Courtesy of the artist.

### Conclusion: Working in the Bowels of the Beast

As Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung writes, we, BIPOCS working at the centres of power and art institutions in Western capitals, are being digested by these institutions—the *bowels of the beast*—centres of colonial tradition from where the pedagogies of modernity and coloniality as art are exported. If we are being digested, he proposes that we can at least “cause an indigestion to the beast.”<sup>10</sup> This proposition is tempting. They eat us, metabolising our concerns for diversity, justice, and inclusion as theirs, using our ideas and including our perspectives, thus emptying them from their original spirit. Yes, we are being digested, but is being agents of indigestion our only agency?

If we move our attention away from the beast and its bowels (Western institutions) to society at large (global and local), is it mere indigestion that we can provide? Or can we induce process of purging in order to achieve cure? To cure the beast and its bowels might propose an uneasy and probably too naive task. Through indigestion and purging, choreography and curating could propose a form of curing, so needed in critical times not of the bowels of the beast but to the communities we engage with. To purge proposes a cleansing [*limpia*] of Western institutional spaces from their colonial habits through unmarketable spaces of conviviality and good living.

But why would Western art institutions invest in non-economical transactions? As Ivan Illich mentions, the move from the industrial and technocratic paradigm of growth in production and consumption is a dangerous project whose effects are here to stay. Toxicity and pollution, climate change, climate displacements, heat, fires, and drought are the current effects of that modern paradigm. In the transition from growth to a new paradigm amid environmental unbalance and global crisis, conviviality and good living are crucial keys. Arts as practices of knowing and being-with, which then promote epistemic justice, may move to counter act the monoculture of the mind.

### **Curing the Space, a Recipe:**

We use copal for the task of cleansing colonial spaces from their assumptions of universality and purity, which are part of the monoculture of the mind. Copal is a tree resin related to the forest and not to plantations. Burning copal is an old practice to engage with air and with the invisible in pre-Columbian Mesoamerica. Copal (nahuatlism of copalli, which translates as resin or incense in Spanish) is the name given to various aromatic vegetable resins in an intermediate stage of polymerization and hardening between the resin and amber. The most common and well-known copal comes from the trees of the Burseraceae family: *Bursera aloexylon*, *B. graveolens*, *B. jorullensis*, and *Protium Copal*.

Copal is a very important element in the medical and religious tradition of Mesoamerica since pre-Hispanic times, since the smoke it gives off when burned was used by the civilisations of this area as an offering to the entities and as a therapy for different physical and spiritual ailments. Even today, these uses are common within traditional indigenous medicine.

Ingredients:

- Two teaspoons of copal
- One piece of charcoal
- A recipient, preferable made of clay
- Matches or a lighter

Light the charcoal; it can be a shisha charcoal, which is easy to find in Central Europe and very handy for this purpose. Make sure it is well lit; you will notice the amber spreading into the dark body of the charcoal.

Place it on the recipient.

Grind the copal, a small stone that fits in a teaspoon.

Place the charcoal in the recipient.

Take the copal, which is now a white powder, and place it on the well-lit charcoal using your fingertips.

Observe the smoke, breath it in, and proceed to cleanse the space with it; make sure you invoke all pre-colonial native entities you know, have heard, know, or can remember.

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### **Notes**

**I** Here, I refer to *Mestiza* in the sense of Gloria Anzaldúa's definition of "The new mestiza," as a new consciousness represented by a woman living in two cultures at the same time; this consciousness pre-supposes a decolonization of the self and of knowing. See Gloria Anzaldúa, *Borderland/La Frontera: The New Mestiza* (San Francisco: Aunt Lute Books, 1987).

**2** Here, I refer to Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui's understanding of the Quechua concept *Ch'iñi* [in Spanish, *cheje*] as an alternative to *mestizaje*. See Silvia Rivera Cusicanqui, *Un mundo ch'iñi es posible* (Buenos Aires: Tinta Limón, 2018).

**3** See the definition of pedagogies in Rolando Vázquez, *Vistas of Modernity: Decolonial aesthetics and the end of the contemporary* (Prinsenbeek: Jap Sam Books, 2020).

**4** "Curing is supporting us to be well, before we get sick or before the world gets sick; it is important to always be healing, to be offering, doing your dance, your rituals to strengthen us and to flourish." [Translated by the author]. Juan José Ramirez, conversation with the author, 12 June 2022.

**5** The notion of blooming together [*floreecer juntos*] can be found today in orally transmitted indigenous knowledge from diverse origins in Mesoamerica. This notion brings the accomplishment of our living process in relation to vegetal life.

**6** These two metaphors, strengthening and blooming, which I take here from the Mesoamerican context, since Wixarika people speak an Uto Aztec language, but both metaphors are shared by different peoples of Abya Yala [the American continent] are in relation to social practices or ritual acknowledgment.

**7** The maintainers [*los mantenedores*] are a set of relations with those sustaining our living processes. Water, mountains, the sea, rivers, *maíz* [corn], animals and plants, invisible entities are understood as maintainers.

**8** Amanda Piña, "The School of the Jaguar," *Engangered Human Movements* 3 (2019): 283–296.

**9** <https://nadaproductions.at/projects/endangered-human-movements/the-school-of-mountains-and-water>

**10** See Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung, *The Delusions of Care* (Berlin: Archive Books, 2021).

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**Amanda Piña's** work embodies the political and social power of movement grounded on indigenous forms of knowledge and worldmaking/maintaining. Piña is a multifaceted artist and curator working through choreographic and dance research, creating and curating artistic and educational frameworks, writing and editing publications around what she refers to as endangered movement practices. Her work is presented inside performing and visual arts contexts. Piña is Chilean-Mexican-Austrian and based in Vienna and Mexico City. Her work has been presented in institutions such as Tanzquartier Wien, Kunsthalle Wien and mumok Vienna, Fondation Cartier pour l'Art Contemporain Paris, Kunstenfestivaldesarts, DE SINGEL Antwerp, Royal Festival Hall London, Museo Universitario del Chopo, Mexico, NAVE and Festival Santiago a Mil, Chile. From 2008 until 2022, she led and curated the gallery specialized in expanded choreography and performance nadaLokal in Vienna, Austria. Currently, she is working on the realization of the long-term project Endangered Human Movements, concerned with the re-appearance of ancestral forms of movements and cultural practices. Five volumes of research in the scope of this project have been already realized, which include performances, installations, videos, publications, curatorial frames (*The School of the Jaguar* and *The School of Mountains and Water*), workshops, and lectures. She is a research fellow at DAS THIRD, at the department of Theatre, Dance and Performance at Amsterdam University of the Arts. Currently, she is working on the creation of *The School of Earth*, a residency program in La Costa Chica de Guerrero, Mexico.



# Dance House Organisms: Reflections on Institutional Ecologies (for a Future Dance House in Europe)

Miriam Althammer

What institutions are needed in dance—specifically contemporary dance taking place far away from city theaters and ballet stages—is a question that increasingly arose from the 1980s on. Initially, contemporary dance operated more in smaller structures such as festivals, workshops, and off-spaces, and with little municipal or state funding. Meanwhile, at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, as the international center of contemporary dance shifted to Europe and its vibrant dance and performance scenes, and New York lamented having lost its decades-long status as the capital of contemporary dance,<sup>1</sup> more and more dance houses formed as larger structures with their own budgets, means of production, resident artists, and management with a permanent team.<sup>2</sup> Contemporary dance became institutionalized, and European networks such as IDEE (and later EDN)<sup>3</sup> joined forces to offer a platform, to formulate cultural-political concerns, and to bring dance out of its niche as an art form that was often marginalized alongside the other arts.

The European dance houses are considered multi-houses that operate without a fixed company, but link different areas in dance: training, theory/further education, production, and presentation. The aim of their structures is to bring together different ways of working, to explore body and movement concepts, and to work in an interdisciplinary and often research-oriented way.<sup>4</sup> The concepts behind these houses are therefore diverse—and are constantly being (self-)critically reexamined in terms of their conditions. In this state of change, what these dance houses possibly have in common is that they shape their own instability, which is how it was summarized after a network meeting, and “can probably only be captured, and defined through the dance that takes place in it or that is made possible there.”<sup>5</sup>

This text seeks to re-perspectivize the paradigm of the European dance house and to challenge it against the background of current discourses around posthumanism, ecology, and coexistence. What organizational forms can a dance house take in the future? What social responsibility can the art form of dance assume in view of its specifics around movement knowledge, using the physical intelligence of the body for negotiating different practices and concerns? What role can be assigned to the human body at all in a time when humans are declared to be a danger to the Earth? How can new forms of interrelationships—that is, ecologies—be produced through the dancing body, which has always understood itself as relational?

Thinking about the instability of a dance house as a potential for a future art institution that creates its own institutional ecologies is thus the starting point for my investigation of Dance House Organisms. Accordingly, Dance House Organisms is to be thought of as a speculative draft at a moment of crossroads in a global climate and biodiversity crisis, and at the end of the anthropocentric age that reflects artistic and institutional practices; as a modularly structured work and presentation house for dance, movement, and bodies; and branching out in its individual elements and being

variable like an organism—with the aim of thinking about the human body together with bodies of nature and the Earth.<sup>6</sup>

### **Moved by Bodies—Captured Through Bodies**

In a dance house, bodies are omnipresent; a dance house is moved by bodies. And movement always goes hand in hand with change—precisely, with the instability of the object of dance in the sense of its processuality, as well as the constant questioning of its institutional structures and forms of work. Thus, Nicole Haitzinger describes institutionalization in dance as a “future question”:

Spaces produced by gestures and movements are potential spaces, spaces in the making that produce difference instead of leveling it. In this sense, dance—as a perspective, as an event—can also be understood as a critique of (its) institutionalization and develop its subversive potential in the in-between.<sup>7</sup>

To capture a dance house through dance, to admit its potential in the in-between, and to connect it to the current discourses around posthumanism, ecology, and coexistence means not only thinking about it choreographically and in motion. To capture a dance house through dance means using the transformative potential of moving bodies and their gestures to imagine an institution for the future: to decentralize and to pluralize the institution itself and to create transfers of experience. Through these experiences the mechanisms of institutional *ecologies* (in the sense of interrelationships of the organism with its environment<sup>8</sup> as well as in its etymological origin—*oikos*—as studies of our house/home and therefore the Earth) can be applied to performative practices. A dance house is thus rather captured through bodies—the essential material and medium of dance. Not only do human bodies move in this imagined dance house, but so do those of non-human actors: objects, animals, plants, unknown beings, organisms, materialities, ideas, and all the bodies that make the human body a part of the Earth and question its assumed singular knowledge position.

While discourses around the global climate and biodiversity crisis are radically changing our perspective of the Earth, the idea of the history of the Earth and our role as humans as causes of this crisis are now shifting towards the perspective of being part of a complex mesh of ecologies. Isabelle Stengers’ notion of an “ecology of practice” as “a tool for thinking through what is happening”<sup>9</sup> can be used to question and reinvent institutional ecologies of a dance house, through aiming “at the construction of new ‘practical identities’ for practices, that is, new possibilities for them to be present, or in other words to connect. It thus does not approach practices as they are [...] but as they may become.”<sup>10</sup> The concern of this future dance house is thus to link, unlearn, diverge, imagine, and transform (human) action in artistic as well as social contexts with the practices of other existing living beings, in order to make clear how important a preoccupation with our relationship to the Earth is on a structural, aesthetic, and discursive level and how for too long it has not been considered in the social sciences and humanities<sup>11</sup> (as well as in the practice or theory of the arts).

### **Dance House—A Living Entity?**

Bodies do not exist for themselves alone. They relate to each other, live with and from each other, are dependent. To transfer this understanding to a dance house, I suggest understanding it as an *organism*—as a living entity.<sup>12</sup> An organism reflects a form of life that, like an organized body or system, is composed of mutually interdependent parts and maintain various vital processes. This understanding leads to a shift of perspective on the structure and positioning of a dance house. By underlining that a dance house

is not stable, but also that it is constituted in the moment of being, I argue that it is working and moving (together) in relationship to a surrounding environment and its living beings and lifeless components. As Isabelle Stengers puts it, we can understand this practice as involvement both “through the middle” and “with the surroundings” because “there is no identity of a practice independent of its environment.”<sup>13</sup>

In the idea of translating an organism into curatorial action, *discourse* becomes the supporting element: discourse is conceived from its literal sense—as a *running to and from*, as *running in different ways*. Using the body, its knowledge and practices as a constituting element, the individual areas—the organs—of a dance house first develop out of the discourse. The parts of an organism are constantly changing; in other words, they are in motion. As a result, the idea that a dance house and its discursive approaches are formed along the lines of choreographic thinking and acting becomes central: on the one hand, as a constellation “in terms of composing space, objects, and bodies, in opening paths and structures of participation and placement through movement,”<sup>14</sup> on the other hand via the modes of perception of a body as “regimes of senses, artistic languages, forms of expression.”<sup>15</sup>

Dance House Organisms is considered an ever-changing structure, which is flexible enough to adapt to constant transformation, but specific enough to develop as a conception for the fusion and conglomeration of diverse thematic fields in dance. These mobile and moving components result in a structure that creates possibilities for arranging bodies, their concepts and discourses in the time and space—with the goal of capturing and conceptualizing a dance house through bodies: to foster new sensibilities and connectivities as well as to produce encounters, resonances, immersive practices, and bodily manifestations. To create this conception in this way as “solidarity of presence in the other”<sup>16</sup> different temporalities and rhythms are required, as well as possible collectivities that change their form and focus depending on time and place.

Therefore Dance House Organisms is not only about artistically researching environmental phenomena or translating scientific findings for an audience and making them sensually tangible, as eco artists and the developments around environmental art have been doing since the 1960s.<sup>17</sup> It also involves bringing together individual artistic and institutional practices with ecological practices and determining how to interconnect these genealogies in a future vision of a dance house that dedicates its form, structure, and content to the discourses around the global climate and biodiversity crisis and in negotiating its planetary limits—in the sense that it belongs to these discourses because “just the experience nourish[es] your imagination”<sup>18</sup> and not a general idea. Discourse thereby becomes a tool in which the thematic fields interact as organs just as much as the modes in which these thematic fields emerging in the Dance House Organisms always link, embody, regulate, and complement each other in a particular way. Resulting transitions follow the desire for multidimensionality and multiple (and at the same time partial) access to the environments of the dance house. The intention is to create a possible physical location for a society of humans and non-humans, which can forge global alliances and assume responsibility as an institution located in Europe.<sup>19</sup> Connecting and constellating the different organs and modes in this nomadic way also points to the fact that humanism as an Eurocentric concept and “the restricted notion of what counts as a human is one of the keys to understand[ing] how we got to a post-human turn at all,”<sup>20</sup> as Rosi Braidotti formulates in her vision of a life beyond the self.

### Body-Based Practices as Modes of Creativity

The common basis for the development of these discourse structures are body-based practices, which have meanwhile become an essential part of contemporary dance training and are fed more by somatics and alternative body and movement concepts than by traditional dance techniques. (Self-)care, diversity-sensible aspects, and the topos of the healing and awareness of states and functions of the body—such as breathing, sensing, listening, noticing, and settling into one's environments—are central to body-based practices. Only through this transfer of artistic practice into social experience can an intersubjective and inclusive exchange be initiated, one that permeates the dance house as a cultural site and at the same time the forms of life existing around it.

Transferred to the question how a dance house can participate in ecologizing a society, body-based practices can explore the role of (human) bodies in society and on the Earth. Because this is not about a farewell to the human body (as some posthuman utopias signal), but a search for possibilities of re-connection—through the dancing, moving body—to rehabilitate and reinvent it with the help of its physical intelligence. Less an instrument of expression or a medium of representation, the body can then be understood in its fluidity as a non-unitary subject immersed in the ecologies of the Earth, as it is implied in posthuman theories.<sup>21</sup> Which gestures and movements can be found to enter into these new relationships? How can dance as a reception- as well as production-activated aesthetic knowledge practice convey other forms of knowledge or expand knowledge about bodies of and through physical activities to create ecologies of dance? How can movement knowledge and contextualized corporeality as reflected in contemporary dance become part of practices that engage in post-anthropocentric modes of creativity?<sup>22</sup>

The curatorial aspect of the discourse in Dance House Organisms is not to be thought of in terms of productions, but rather in terms of practices. Dance is thus to be understood not least in its social function, and accordingly as a performative force with which temporary assembly spaces and multi-layered contexts of work and exchange are formed around the questions: How do we gather and learn from one another, and live with something that is not going to disappear again? To whom can agency be attributed through movement, and can it be transferred from body to body at all? What practices can we invent to find a better relationship living with the Earth and its rhythms? Can we invent practices that are no longer focused on artists' productivity but on rethinking the modes of production and reception of art? And how can we create a milieu for "an experimental togetherness among practices, a dynamics of pragmatic learning of what works and how"<sup>23</sup> in order to "foster its own force, make present what causes practitioners to think and feel and act"<sup>24</sup>?

### Curatorial Fluidities

Taking up transformative potentials of the Earth and connect it with the fluidity of moving bodies into an institution like a dance house is meant to continuously work on these questions (and not only represent them) as well as to take up different perspectives and ways of perception as a participatory mode of the curatorial. Caring, regenerating, participating (instead of controlling, exploiting, utilizing)<sup>25</sup> are the modes for rethinking the economies of production and collaboration as institutional ecologies. This critical examination is also associated with the notion of "performing the process of institutionalization,"<sup>26</sup> seen in the following way:

[A] radical shift in a temporal dimension of production, fighting the project logic, however at the same time allowing a multiplicity of proposals and imagination, through which modes of work and thinking are enabled, supported and also sustained. This can be only possible if this process is understood as [...] a dedication to movement in the present time [...] a difficult process of giving change to the present—visible between the repetition of the past and imagination of the future.<sup>27</sup>

Based on the assumption, as pointed out in the quote above, that formats such as performances are re-evaluated in their modes of (re)presentation and temporal dimension instead of as production-oriented work, body-based practices and performance as a socially engaged practice become the focus, and with that the role of the curatorial is also changing—it will be more about stimulating cyclical processes as well as establishing networks of knowledge that are based on practices of sharing, sustainability, and resilience and question hitherto traditional forms of knowledge production and transmission.

Capturing a house with bodies indicates setting social structures in motion, not only including the non-human actors of the Earth in these concepts and creating new entanglements between them to reflect on fair living conditions for all bodies, but also thinking about these structures transgenerationally, transhistorically, and transculturally as “naturecultures.”<sup>28</sup> This means creating multilayered and fluid constellations, networking with a worldwide society of humans and non-humans, and at the same time giving space to different publics, thus creating possible forms of interaction permeated by movements of (body) knowledge as well as a meandering discourse. Possibly, the curatorial itself instead becomes an organism, a system that in its intra-, inter-, and transdisciplinary complexity creates spaces and moments for all bodies alike and transforms the instability of a dance house into a mode of constant transformation.

In the sense of “a return to Earth”<sup>29</sup> as Bruno Latour describes it, the point is to deal with “a profound mutation in our relation to the world”<sup>30</sup> and to develop visions for new ways of working and living, but also to carry the awareness of the danger that life on the planet is threatened into the arts and to find productive ways of coping with it. Especially as a European institution, such a dance house would exist with the historical obligation to contribute to global sustainability and to find a way of dealing with Europe’s heritage as a hitherto large consumer of resources. Thus, out of this gesture, a dance house should convey the complex mechanisms of the Earth and its organisms, as a future laboratory and with the help of the ecologies of dance—of moving bodies, through and in which one recognizes and seeks to understand oneself as part of nature and the Earth.

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## Notes

**1** See Michael Seaver, “Continental Shift,” *Dance Theatre Journal* 1 (2006): 1–4.

**2** Exceptions are The Place in London (est. 1966 as Contemporary Dance Trust) and the Centres Choréographiques in France, which emerged decentrally in the 1970s. See Sigrid Gareis, “Welche Institutionen braucht der Tanz?,” Website of RESO Tanznetzwerk Schweiz, accessed November 11, 2022, <http://reso.ch/de/uid-42e969f0/uid-83c9b55a>.

**3** IDEE-Initiatives through European Exchange was founded in 2005 as the forerunner of EDN (European Dancehouse Network) with the aim of strengthening the importance of dance houses in the field of European cultural policy. See Andrea Amort, “Echt



Workshop session at group show co-curated by the students of the *Curating in the Performing Arts* university course, 2017, SZENE Salzburg.

EU: Tanzhäuser-Liaison. Tanzquartier Wien verbindet sich u.a. mit Paris, London, Düsseldorf, Cork,” *Observer Wien* (27.2. 2006): 30; <https://www.ednetwork.eu/activities/idee>.

**4** The Tanzquartier Wien (est. 2001) can serve as a model here as one of the first European dance houses. Other examples of structures that do not operate under the concept of a dance house but take up this model and apply principles of co-existence and dialogue to it are, for example, the Berlin Uferstudios (est. 2010), and the Balkan network Nomad Dance Academy (est. 2005), which focuses on “contemporary choreography as an artistic and social function” and an “eco-responsible way to provide good working conditions for artists and to connect them to other socially relevant contexts.” See Dejan Srhoj, “Dance house as the art of (co)existence: Interview with Gisela Müller and Barbara Friedrich,” *Maska* 29, No. 165-168 (2014): 140-149, <https://nomaddanceacademy.org>.

**5** See Franz Anton Cramer, “Bewegungspläne. Instabilität gestalten: Europäisches Symposium über Tanzpolitik,” *Frankfurter Rundschau*, February 2, 2006, 11.

**6** Approaches to these forms of kinship (as Donna Haraway defines as cross-species interrelationships) can increasingly be found in current art projects, such as *Plant Fever: Design from the Plant Perspective* (Museum für Gestaltung Zürich, 2021) or *Vástáduš eana: The answer is land* (2021), by choreographer Elle Sofe Sara, which explores the ambivalent connection of the human to the ecosystem and our desire for kinship and belonging, using spiritual practices of the Sami.

**7** Nicole Haitzinger, “Die Kunst ist dazwischen: Konzepte, Programme und Manifeste zur kulturellen Institutionalisierung von Tanz,” in *Choreographie und Institution*, eds. Yvonne Hardt and Martin Stern (Bielefeld: transcript, 2014), 119–136; 135.

**8** Ludwig Trepl, *Geschichte der Ökologie. Vom 17. Jahrhundert bis zur Gegenwart. Zehn Vorlesungen* (Frankfurt/Main: Athenäum, 1987), 11.

**9** Isabelle Stengers, “Introductory Notes on an Ecology of Practices,” *Cultural Studies Review* 11, No. 1 (March 2005): 183–196; 185.

**10** *Ibid.*, 186.

**11** See Dipesh Chakrabarty, *The Climate of History in a Planetary Age* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2021).

**12** In the 1970s, the microbiologist Lynn Margulis and chemist, biophysicist, and physician James Lovelock had established the notion of the Earth as a living being and its personification as *Gaia*; See James Lovelock and Lynn Margulis, “Atmospheric Homeostasis by and for the Biosphere: the Gaia hypothesis,” *Tellus (Series A)* 26, Nos. 1-2 (1974): 2–10.

**13** Stengers, “Introductory Notes on an Ecology of Practices,” 187.

**14** Gabriele Brandstetter, “Written on Water: Choreographies of the Curatorial,” in *Cultures of the Curatorial*, eds. Beatrice von Bismarck, Jörn Schafaff, and Thomas Weski (London: Sternberg Press, 2012), 120–131; 120.

**15** Dorothea von Hantelmann, „Wie versammelt sich die globalisierte Welt des 21. Jahrhunderts?,” Course *Curating in the Performing Arts*, University of Salzburg, Webinar (April 24, 2021).

**16** Manuel Borja-Villel taken from Bojana Piškur, “Trees, More-Than-Human Collectives,” accessed November 11, 2022, <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/119/402976/trees-more-than-human-collectives>, *e-flux journal* 119 (June 2021): 1–8; 3.

**17** See Katja Schneider, “‘We have a problem’: Manifest, Ökonomie und Ökologie im 21. Jahrhundert,” in *Clear the Air: Künstler-Manifeste seit den 1960er Jahren*, eds. Burcu Dogramaci and Katja Schneider (Bielefeld: transcript, 2017), 271–286; 272f.

**18** Stengers, “Introductory Notes on an Ecology of Practices,” 192.

**19** An example of this vision is the project *Environmental Dances* by choreographer Christoph Winkler. It combines climate data with dance practice and explores local and global contexts in relation to the dancer’s relationship with landscapes.

**20** Rosi Braidotti, *The Posthuman* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2013), 16.

**21** *Ibid.*, 44 et seq.

**22** An example of a performative, body-based practice that combines with ecological principles is *Body Weather* (BW), which developed from the 1960s on, emerging from the Japanese Butoh tradition. It uses the practices of “slow movement and stillness” through “sensing” and “undoing” rather than “controlling the body” and seeks to connect the moving body to its environment and to cultivate a bodily attention. Pini points out that BW “shifts the focus from an egocentric perspective towards an ecological attunement.” See Sarah Pini, “On the Edge of Undoing: Ecologies of Agency in Body Weather,” in *Collaborative Embodied Performance Ecologies of Skill*, eds. Kate Bicknell and John Sutton (Bloomsbury: Methuen Drama, 2022), 35–52.

**23** Stengers, “Introductory Notes on an Ecology of Practices,” 195.

**24** *Ibid.*, 195.

**25** See Eva von Redecker, *Revolution für das Leben: Philosophie der neuen Protestformen* (Frankfurt/Main: S. Fischer Verlag, 2020).

**26** Bojana Kunst, “The Institutionalisation, Precarity and the Rhythm of Work”, *Kunstenpunt*, 2017, accessed November 11, 2022, <https://www.kunsten.be/dossiers/perspectief-kunstenaar/perspective-institution/4450-the-institutionalisation-precarity-and-the-rhythm-of-work>.

**27** *Ibid.*

**28** Rosi Braidotti, *Posthuman Knowledge* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2019), 102.

**29** Bruno Latour, *Facing Gaia: Eight Lectures on the New Climatic Regime* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2017), 3.

**30** *Ibid.*, 8.

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# The Practice of Planetary Care and the No-thing that Remains: An Exercise in Co-Thinking Contemporary Art Exhibitions and Dance Festivals

## Ong Keng Sen

This short reflection will think through some of the differences between the conceptualisation of major contemporary art exhibitions (as evidenced by *documenta fifteen*) and major contemporary dance festivals (the writer was part of the curatorial team for *What the Body Remembers* at Akademie der Künste (ADK)/Berlin in 2019 and also witnessed the last four editions of *Tanz im August*/Berlin since 2019). This discourse is vital to me as an artist-curator who founded and has curated the first four editions of the *Singapore International Festival of Arts* (SIFA), 2014–17. I curated a lot of contemporary dance at SIFA, and there was even an entire mini-dance festival in 2015 called *Dance Marathon: Open With A Punk Spirit!* within it.<sup>1</sup> From this experience of SIFA, I initiated the international *Curators Academy*, including the Gorki Theater *Young Curators Academy*,<sup>2</sup> to continue the interrogation of curation in performing arts and performance. My synergy with visual arts has mainly been in the form of laboratory processes curating contemporary artists to join *The Flying Circus Project* (FCP) occurring in Singapore (1996, 1998, 2000, 2004), Vietnam (2007), Cambodia (2010), and Myanmar (2013).<sup>3</sup> My work with contemporary art and the laboratory process has continued into artistic directing the Prince Claus Fund *Mobile Lab* at *documenta fifteen* in 2022.

This reflection will not be attempting to list the pros and cons of either model, contemporary art or dance, but will instead propose some beginning thoughts for others to elaborate, contest, or discuss. In a sense, this is an invitation to co-think. As both events, *documenta fifteen* and *Tanz im August*, are not complete at the time of penning this reflection, I will stay with the speculative and the potentialities, as a way to free ourselves from facts and realities that may limit co-thinking. In this light, I will not discuss the allegations of anti-Semitism which have mired *documenta fifteen*, but instead reiterate its concept as an idealistic paratopia.<sup>4</sup>

It should be emphasised that *documenta* happens once in five years and is very different from an annual dance festival. The financial resources available to both are incomparable. The expectations placed on the outputs of these two “bodies of work” are vastly different. With an exhibition manifested once in five years and a combustion of live art every twelve months, one is inevitably struck by the failure of co-relating both bodies. However, if we free ourselves from realities, we can begin to journey into the fantasy that the grass is always greener on the other side.

### The Grass Is Always Greener on the Other Side

How many times have I encountered the wish of performance artists (including myself) to inhabit the more conceptual space of contemporary visual arts? Contemporary art, through a myriad of mediums, encounters the social, the political, and the cultural with a fluidity. Contemporary art constructs an imaginary, opening a porous space and an expanded consideration of the issues at stake. It seems to be able to

shake off the subjective shackles of emotion, narrative, the body, and real-time demands from audiences in a physical venue who insist on specific conclusions for a performance work. The pressure of a cathartic collective experience before the curtain call often negates the reflexivity and introspection of meandering associations that freely accumulate in an exhibition.

On the other hand, there is the wish of visual artists who desire to engage with performance, the doing that goes beyond the object, the thing in a white cube. ruangrupa, the Artistic Directors for *documenta fifteen*, proposed the *lumbung*, or the rice barn, as the way forward for 2022. As they clarified with their press release on 18 June 2020, *lumbung* is not a theme for the exhibition but an everyday practice.<sup>5</sup> The *lumbung* proposes a sharing of resources to gain sustainability in the long run. It is a practice of self-governance that advocates a collective responsibility of mutual care. It can be perceived as a common which springs from the Global South. “The *lumbung* as an artistic and economic model will be practiced alongside its values of collectivity, generosity, humour, trust, independence, curiosity, endurance, regeneration, transparency, sufficiency, and connectivity between a multiplicity of locales, [including Kassel,] rendering them planetary as a result.”<sup>6</sup>



Visitors at the entrance for the group show co-curated by the students of the *Curating in the Performing Arts* university course, 2017, SZENE Salzburg. Photograph by: Hubert Auer.

### Identity, Representation, and Humans in *Tanz im August 2022*

Dance is deeply impacted by diverse identity politics and representation, vividly expressed in the 2022 *Tanz im August* opening performance by Marrugeku, entitled *Jurrungu Ngan-Ga*. It detailed the different experiences of indigenous, displaced, exiled, transgender, and settler subjects in Australia. The message of the indefatigable Virve Sutinen, Festival Director, is one of human resilience after the pandemic. It is headlined by “Nothing beats live experience!”<sup>7</sup> The festival engages with practical aspects of new touring, ecologically smart mechanisms of travelling shows working with local casts. Human beings and their resilience are clearly at the centre of many productions in 2022. Sutinen concludes, “At any given time, dance is one of those human experiences that we share as people despite our differences. It is fundamental. Dance needs to be shared, experienced, and lived through together. It is always a conversation, which might challenge us, disturb us, but also empower, and even comfort us.”<sup>8</sup>

### The Non-Human and the Planetary in *documenta fifteen*

As I sit in my room typing, I sense that the gladioli in the vase have grown taller. I can feel the gladioli stems moving, as they inch firmly and purposefully towards the light coming from the window. There seems to be a force coming from within the gladioli stems, pushing individual flowers to peer out of the sepals and burst into blossom.

It reminds me of Nguyen Trinh Thi’s work in the *documenta fifteen* entitled *And They Die a Natural Death* where she has cast lights on chilli plants, projecting its shadows on the walls of the Rondell venue. This is the defence tower in fortifications of the old town wall built in the 16<sup>th</sup> century. Accompanying the shadows of this non-human installation are the concurrent sounds of native indigenous flutes blown, not by humans but, by winds in the forests of northern Vietnam. These sounds are programmed with the assistance of artificial intelligence into a live soundscape and connected to Kassel via the Internet. This audio-visual non-human installation is meditative and haunting, as one encounters it in the historical torture chambers of the Rondell. Nguyen was inspired by the still-censored autobiographical novel, *A Tale Told in 2000*, where Bui Ngoc Tan wrote about his life in the detention camps on the indigenous lands of North Vietnam.<sup>9</sup> There, political prisoners were forced into hard labour amongst the ecosystems of the chilli flora. This was a recurring strategy of *documenta fifteen*, connecting the local of Kassel where the exhibition is and the local of the exhibiting artist.

The *lumbung* is a practice that embraces collaborations with non-humans. In particular, the *lumbung* focuses on the planetary. This was written about by Paul Gilroy in his book *Postcolonial Melancholia*:

[...] the translocal impact of political ideologies, social relations, and technological changes that have fostered a novel sense of interdependence, simultaneity, and mutuality in which the strategic and economic choices made by one group on our planet may be connected in a complex manner with the lives, hopes, and choices of others who may be far away.<sup>10</sup>

The planetary has since been developed by Achille Mbembe as an ethics for a common custodianship of the Earth, continuing life for everyone and everything.<sup>11</sup>

### The Tradition of Care for Humans

Putting a larger context into dance festivals, it is valid to note that curators and festival directors often presented the new works of dance-makers they have supported, nurtured, presented. This is not always dependent on a conceptual approach but instead followed the trajectory of human labour. The heart of dance festivals can be said to be centred on the human being, the dance-maker. It stems from a legacy of taking care of dance-makers who have grown up with the festival. This is particularly clear in a workshop dance festival like *ImPulsTanz* in Vienna where the human being is taken care of in professional workshops designed for a community of dancers. This can also be seen in the wish of *ruangrupa* in *documenta fifteen* to move from a typical exhibition into a more commons practice of the *lumbung*, a practice of not just aesthetics but of political performance. With such a motivation, *documenta fifteen* made a clear break from presenting the usual suspects in a visual arts biennial or triennial. Some exhibiting *lumbungs* were not even visual arts collectives, such as Más Arte Más Acción from Colombia, which is concerned with nature, ecology, climate change, and indigenous rights including land rights (although one of the founders is a visual artist). The foundation of *documenta fifteen* was no longer just the human community of artists but the practice of sharing time, space, energy, and including non-human knowledge. There were numerous archival projects with tens of thousands of documents, speaking for themselves without human mediation.

### A Planetary Archive and the Dance Festival

From 24 August to 21 September 2019, an ambitious dance festival, *What The Body Remembers*, was organised by the ADK in Berlin. It delved into the legacy and heritage of dance. Contemporary performance in the late 1990s was that which disappeared.<sup>12</sup> But Rebecca Schneider, in her 2011 book, reframed performance as no longer the ephemeral. She proposed that performance is what remains.<sup>13</sup> In the era of re-enactments, re-performances of an earlier generation of work, there has been a very strong reappraisal of what performance is. Instead of performance that disappears, performance remains. Schneider applies this to political performance: how do the Vietnam War protests remain and become remanifested again? I was a witness to how these protests remained and became re-performed as *Occupy Wall Street* in my days as a PhD student at New York University for instance.

It is this context of re-performance which guided my interpretation of the festival that I witnessed, as well as co-curated. The festival embraced strict re-constructions of scores following the principle of archival preservation, as well as re-performances which were new enactments of seminal dances developed from archives. The team of curators was Heike Albrecht, Gabriele Brandstetter, Nele Hertling, Johannes Odenthal, Ong Keng Sen, and Madeline Ritter. My role was added fairly late, as I joined in the fall of 2018 to provide some non-European perspectives as well as prevent a Eurocentric conclusion for bodies and memories.

This was the description of the festival in the ADK website:

The legacy and heritage of dance is immaterial. Yet contemporary dancers and choreographers are still building on an incredibly rich and powerful modern history, which covers more or less the entire 20th century. Artists such as Isadora Duncan, Mary Wigman and Valeska Gert stand for emancipation, for liberation from gender roles, for utopian awakenings and political appropriation, but also for resistance against societal conventions. Post-war modernism behaved in similar ways, be it dance theatre in Germany, Butoh in Japan, mod-

ern and postmodern dance in the United States, or contemporary dance in France and Belgium.<sup>14</sup>

The end result comprised performances, discourse, an international campus, a publication, and an exhibition called *The Century of Dance*.

What I found particularly remarkable was that the legacy of dance was not immaterial but very material. Much remained in material sources: notations, writings, books, objects, stills, and some moving image recordings. Perhaps the only legacy that was primarily immaterial was Chandralekha's from Madras, India. It was embodied in the contemporary dancer, Padmini Chettur. I had curated Padmini to not present a choreography of Chandralekha's, but her own new solo *Philosophical Enactment 1*. Padmini's body, attitude, and philosophy of dance had been completely designed by Chandralekha. Chandralekha's modernist legacy was to rewrite the ancient Indian dances into dances of emancipation for the female body. These were all put on the body of Padmini. Padmini's work after becoming an independent dance-maker was to consciously erase all that Chandralekha had embedded in her.

A book in the dance archive is an object which is clearly non-human. Yet, it is written by human agency. Perhaps it is confusing to separate human and non-human in the archival turn of contemporary dance. In the light of this, it may be useful to adopt instead, the aforementioned Achille Mbembe's "planetary." Mbembe developed this concept further in another interview:

For me, the planetary immediately evokes a connection between life and its futures on the one hand, and the Earth on the other hand. What comes to my mind is the biophysical organic material and mineral order—a geological magma-filled rock topped with the entangled orders of physical, organic phenomena such as plants, animals, minerals and so forth, as well as the artifacts and things and tools we have invented. In other words, the planetary evokes what we call in French *le vivant*, which in English is something like "the living world." *Le vivant* is, for me, the planetary in its multiplicity, in its animate and inanimate forms, as it undergoes its endless process of transformation ... I find it almost impossible to think of the planetary without thinking about life and about the Earth. I probably owe that to my interest in the animist metaphysics of precolonial Africa. That's the archive I draw on to propose this kind of understanding of the planetary as so closely linked to life, which itself is an indivisible process.<sup>15</sup>

We arrive at a complex fusion of life and *the Earth*, rather than a separation of human and non-human. In particular, the planetary refers explicitly to the artefacts, things, and tools which the human has invented such as notations, writings, books, objects, stills, and moving image recordings. The emphasis seems to be on *living, multiplicity, and transformation* on the "geological magma-filled rock." There is also a connection made between animism and metaphysics, bringing in a spiritual, irrational realm which the human and non-human do not necessarily rationally include.

Below is the opening description of a fifteen-minute scene performed by Tomomi Tanabe in Takao Kawaguchi's *The Sick Dancer* which I curated for the ADK during the festival. *The Sick Dancer* was created primarily from the texts of *Yameru Maihime (The Ailing Dance Mistress)* written by Tatsumi Hijikata. Hijikata was the founder of a genre of dance performance art from Japan called *Butoh*, or the *Dance of Darkness*, often

said by American writers to have begun as a response to the effects of the Hiroshima atomic bomb.<sup>16</sup>

A contorted body (rather than a human) writhing slowly on a tatami mat's floorspace. The *living* body is unable to stand, helpless. The ends of the body, especially the fingers, are expressively grasping the air. Its legs and arms are bent, curled up, gnarled. At one moment, the elbow stabs into mid-air. The body is in a constant act of balancing on at least one point pressed into the ground, be it shoulder, elbow, wrist, hip, or side of the body, while the rest of the body pushes off, reaching into space. The body turns from side to side, rolling over. Sometimes the arm is twisted behind the body, seemingly grabbing something behind. The entire body is encased in a sheer nylon stocking including the head and face. Finally, after a painstaking length of time, the body is able to clamber onto its knees, only to fall back onto the tatami. The soles of the body stroke the mat and gradually the feet lift into the air. Now the soles are caressing the air. The two feet cross and begin to rub each other. The body changes its contact point with the mat, from the side of the body to once again the knees. It pulls and slides the entire shoulder back into the body. Now the body is precariously perched at the furthest edge of the tatami. The body begins to tear at the stocking material, peeling it off as if it is burnt skin.

*The Ailing Dance Mistress*, the longest single coherent text by Hijikata, was never made into a dance by him. This text is therefore not a dance notation in the conventional sense. The above scene was perhaps choreographed and *transformed* by Kawaguchi from the following words of *The Ailing Dance Mistress* of Hijikata:

The sickly person, hardly out of bed ever, was in the dark corner of the house, moaning and groaning all the time. I could say that my custom of releasing the body onto the tatami mat like a fish was learned and acquired from the lesson of this sickly dance mistress. One could observe her body was made of a silhouette as if making a wish, but even that would be trapped in the darkness of something that had bursted and borne fruit somewhere. The darkness of the other side known to none, a dark resurrection, a beginning which she would not have remembered. That's why I grew up taking breaths in such a place where nothing can be taught or learned. When forced to watch an ill being like this, there would be scraped off out of my body a desire to have my shin bones smashed to my heart's content with a club or something and thus, undo the knots of my body.<sup>17</sup>

Butoh is notated not by a score but by words indicating qualia. Qualia is "the root of every segment of experience, connected with sensory interpretation."<sup>18</sup> Movement is fused with affect. With words as notation, the same butoh dance was subjectively and variedly expressed by different individuals, with diverse temporal dimensions, for instance. Most times, Butoh is documented by "Butoh-fu," which are the words said by the choreographer to his dancer in rehearsal, workshop, or the studio, written down by that dancer.<sup>19</sup> This leads to a diverse *multiplicity* of the same dance sequence, documented by different dancers in their specific Butoh-fu. One such dancer was Tanami, performer of *The Sick Dancer*. She had studied directly with Hijikata in his last workshops.

I have made a selection of Butoh-fu (from Hijikata as recorded by his dancers) which can be said to have planetary attributes based on Mbembe's concept. These are taken from a wider collection of Butoh-fu in an instructive text by Takashi Morishita.<sup>20</sup>

Swamp space  
 Burnt down bridge  
 Front and back of a mirror  
 Bull  
 Flower  
 Republic of nerves  
 Evaporation  
 Light  
 From dry dust to ghost

### **Precarity vs Freedom from the Art Market**

On 7 June 2022, I invited Gertrude Flentge to speak at the Prince Claus Funds Mobile Laboratory. Gertrude is part of the Artistic Team of *documenta fifteen*, and she spoke about the fear in the early days that there would be no art at *documenta fifteen*. It seemed that the executive at documenta was concerned that the artistic team was too concentrated on the *lumbung* practice and that nothing would be produced and presented, despite a €42 million budget. Over five years, this is arguably less than it seems. However, apart from this production budget, there is the annual operating budget over five years to produce one mega-product; documenta has very deep infrastructure pockets, unlike most dance festivals.

It can be said that because of the political power of the art market in the global neoliberal economy, contemporary art does not have to face the spectre of precarity that haunts contemporary dance festivals. Contemporary dance festivals are a late player in the arts scenes of most cities. Even though they are attractive to the public, historically, curators and festival directors feel that they have to take care of dance-makers, supporting them to create their new work. For European standards, there is still a very slight dance infrastructure. For instance, in Berlin there is still no established dance house in the city. Apart from ballet companies in musical and opera houses and a resident dance artist based in Volksbühne, there are HAU, Tanzfabrik, Sophiensaele, Radialsystem V, and Dock 11 as smaller presenting houses. Sometimes, extreme expectations are placed on a dance festival to take care of emerging dancers, mid-career dancers, and ageing dancers. This is not an issue for contemporary art. Biennials and documenta do not have to take care of the contemporary community of visual artists. This is the task of cities' *Kunsthallen*, if at all. Nor do museums play this role. A lot of this is justified, as there is an art market where contemporary artists can sell their work. The market also gives freedom. It becomes a buffer against precarity.

### **The No-thing that Remains**

Within the luxurious freedom of the art market, one can perhaps understand why the institution of documenta could afford to accept the ethics of *lumbung* practice proposed for *documenta fifteen*. *ruangrupa* sees *lumbung* as an essential practice to share resources, to encourage those who have more to re-distribute amongst those who have less. They proposed *lumbung* after they had successfully practised it in Indonesia. It is this political performance they proposed to the visual arts establishment in Germany, of producing nothing or, more precisely, no-thing. In a lecture on "Love and Community" in 2001, Jean-Luc Nancy mischievously asserted that "nothing" was not nothing. "Nothing is something, it is a something of no-thing."<sup>21</sup> Nancy talks in the same lecture about sharing no-thing, the space in between. *Ex nihilo*, out of no-thing, something grew. What grew was unpredictable and open.

The concept of *no-thing* is synergistic with performing arts and performance. After all, there is often no thing or no art object made for the art market. What remains of performance are the relationships between all the players, from the ensemble of dance performers to the dance-makers to the presenting house to the audience. The value of performing arts and performance is not a financial value but one of potentiality. In his *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy* (1999), Giorgio Agamben writes that potentiality is the existence of non-Being, the presence of an absence.<sup>22</sup> Performing artists, performance artists, and political activists are often aware that what they make are ephemeral relationships, associations, affects, and care, existing in space and time between different players in the theatre or on the street. What they have made is often in the becoming, rather than a completed art object to be sold in the art market. What these performers are making is still a non-Being; its existence in the work is still absent but its presence can already be felt. The non-tangible impact of some recent German examples, such as Theater Am Turm in Frankfurt, Pina Bausch, and the former Forsythe Company, is still ongoing, an absent presence. As I am writing, *Tanz im August* will be handed over to a new team after nine years. Time will tell what remains of all the performance in this last near-decade.

The no-thing of potentiality is completely new for contemporary art exhibitions, hence the resistance to ruangrupa's practice of *lumbung*: of collectivity, generosity, humour, trust, independence, curiosity, endurance, and regeneration. This no-thing that is not nothing, this potentiality that remains, is alienating for the contemporary art exhibition, which is usually a precursor to the actual sale of artworks. What remains of ruangrupa's *documenta fifteen* will perhaps become more resonant in time because of the planetary care it attempted to perform.

## Notes

**1** "2015 Singapore International Festival of Arts: Post-Empires," accessed 15 September 2022, [https://www.72-13.com/\\_files/ugd/83f211\\_af8d3003f50d4efcb1326bd2d2db2d58.pdf](https://www.72-13.com/_files/ugd/83f211_af8d3003f50d4efcb1326bd2d2db2d58.pdf).

**2** "About," Young Curators Academy, accessed 15 September 2022, <https://youngcuratorsacademy.com/>.

**3** Ong Keng Sen, *Creating Nothing: The Flying Circus Project 1996–2013*, (PhD diss., New York University, 2019), accessed 15 September 2022, <https://www.proquest.com/openview/9ac71b6e0c4d8ac6dfd30784e6217b6b/1?pq-origsite=gscholar&cbl=51922&diss=y>.

**4** Anurima Banerji, "Paratopias of Performance: The Choreographic Practices of Chandralekha," in *Planes of Composition: Dance, Theory and the Global*, ed. Andre Lepecki, Jenn Joy (Kolkata: Seagull Books, 2009), 346–71; 347.

**5** *documenta fifteen*, "Press Release" (June 18, 2020), accessed 15 September 2022, [https://documenta-fifteen.de/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/200618\\_Press-Release\\_introduction-texts\\_english.pdf](https://documenta-fifteen.de/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/200618_Press-Release_introduction-texts_english.pdf).

**6** "The lumbung concept for documenta fifteen: Statement by ruangrupa 18 June 2020," *Universes in Universe*, accessed 15 September 2022, <https://universes.art/en/documenta/2022/lumbung#:~:text=lumbung%20as%20an%20artistic%20and,them%20planetary%20as%20a%20result..>

**7** Virve Sutinen, "Festival Director's Message," *Tanz im August* Program of Marrugeku, *Jurrungu Ngan-Ga*, (5–7 August 2022), Haus der Berliner Festspiele.

**8** Ibid.

**9** Bui Ngoc Tan, *A Tale for 2000*, trans. Dao Phu Ho (Westminster, CA: Nguoi Viet, 2010).

**10** Paul Gilroy, *Postcolonial Melancholia* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005), 72.



**11** Achille Mbembe, “On the Need and the Desire to Repair the World: Requirements for a Planetary Consciousness,” *The [Re]Construction of the World*, an online conference (12–14 February 2021), accessed 15 September 2022, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tepyOL8rm-U>.

**12** Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (New York: Routledge, 1993), 146.

**13** Rebecca Schneider, *Performing Remains: Art and War in Times of Theatrical Reenactment* (New York: Routledge, 2011), 87, 96, 180.

**14** Akademie der Künste, “What the body remembers: Exhibition, Performances, Discourse,” accessed 15 September 2022, <https://www.adk.de/en/projects/2019/tanzerbe/>.

**15** Achille Mbembe, “How To Develop A Planetary Consciousness,” Interview with Nils Gilman and Jonathan S. Blake, *Noema Magazine*, Berggruen Institute, accessed 15 September 2022, <https://www.noemamag.com/how-to-develop-a-planetary-consciousness/>.

**16** Nanako Kurihara, “Hijikata Tatsumi: The Words of Butoh (Introduction),” *The Drama Review* 44, No. 1 (Spring 2000): 12–28; 17.

**17** “Takao Kawaguchi & Tomomi Tanabe, *The Sick Dancer* (Re-creation 2018) with the texts from Tatsumi Hijikata’s *Yameru Maihime (The Ailing Dance Mistress)*,” Program of *The Sick Dancer* (9–11 February 2018), BUoY Arts Center, Tokyo.

**18** Butoh Manual, “Quaglia (Updated: Sep 20, 2021),” accessed 15 September 2022, <https://butohmanual.com/quaglia/>.

**19** “Explanation About Butoh-fu”, *Butoh-Kaden*, accessed 15 September 2022, <https://butoh-kaden.com/en/about/butoh-fu/>.

**20** Takashi Morishita, “Hijikata Tatsumi’s Notational Butoh: An Innovative Method for Butoh Creation (Excerpts),” *Teatro e Storia*, accessed 15 September 2022, [https://www.teatroestoria.it/pdf/37/TeS%2037\\_05.pdf](https://www.teatroestoria.it/pdf/37/TeS%2037_05.pdf).

**21** Jean-Luc Nancy, “Love and Community: A round-table discussion with Jean-Luc Nancy, Avital Ronell and Wolfgang Schirmacher – August 2001,” *Aphelis*, accessed 15 September 2022, [https://aphelis.net/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/NANCY\\_2001\\_Love\\_and\\_Community\\_URLs.pdf](https://aphelis.net/wp-content/uploads/2014/09/NANCY_2001_Love_and_Community_URLs.pdf).

**22** Giorgio Agamben, *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*, (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999), 179.

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# Dramaturge, Curator, Post-Dramaturge: Towards a Change of Paradigm in German-Speaking Theatre and Dance Institutions and Infrastructures

## Jörn Etzold

In recent decades, the term *curator*, widespread in the visual arts, has increased in popularity in the fields of theatre and dance. As it is quite well known, the word derived from the homonymous Latin term that has a somewhat ambivalent meaning: the curator is the one who cares, but also the supervisor and overseer, or the guardian of a minor or ward. The verb at play here is *curare*, which means to take care of something and even to cure, to heal, but also to arrange for or to desire something. The curator hence has a double function—and this double function is inherent in the activity of care or caring itself. Caring seems to be and often is soft and attentive, but it maintains an uncanny proximity to emotional, epistemic, and even physical violence. The one who cares knows what the one—or the many, or the things—s/he cares for need and want. S/he even might know it better than the people in question.

In the field of theatre, dance, and performing arts, the curator partly adopts and transforms tasks that were previously executed by two other figures: on the one hand, the artistic director who, in German state and city theatres, is denominated *Intendant:in* and bears the overall artistic responsibility for an institution, decides on the repertoire, hires the actors and directors, sets themes for seasons, and oversees the productions; on the other hand, the *dramaturge* is a figure of particular interest for the institution of theatre and its critique. The dramaturge can be a *Chefdramaturg*—to quote another very German term coined in the Third Reich<sup>1</sup> when Reich Minister of Public Enlightenment and Propaganda Joseph Goebbels even appointed the *Reichsdramaturg* Rainer Schlösser<sup>2</sup>—and as a dramaturge in chief, s/he is the advisor, right-hand wo/man or counterpart of the artistic director her- or himself, responsible for the general profile of one theatre. But s/he can also be just a simple dramaturge, either in a permanent position at the commissioning theatre and then assigned to certain productions or hired on a freelance basis by a director or a company. Smaller independent theatres have one or two dramaturges who generally do a lot of things as diverse as scouting performance groups, puzzling out hygienic seating arrangements during a pandemic, providing content for social media, explaining performances to the inquiring crowd before the first night, and, always, writing funding applications. In any case, s/he is a *mediator*. When the dramaturge becomes a curator, this does not only mean that s/he now bears a fancier title: it marks a transformation of the institution of theatre and its role in society.

What is or has been a dramaturge? The profession was invented in Germany and has been deeply Protestant and civil from the very beginning. The first dramaturge bearing this title was Gotthold Ephraim Lessing, writing plays for the German National Theatre in Hamburg and simultaneously reflecting and criticizing his and the company's work in the famous *Hamburg Dramaturgy*. A little later, Friedrich Schiller became a dramaturge in Weimar. Lessing's approach to theatre was steeped with Protestantism: he

went back to the original text of Aristotle, interpreting it, however, in a modern way that did not have so much to do with the Greek original's definition of pity and fear. By following Denis Diderot, Lessing wanted the bourgeois spectator to commiserate with people/individuals equal to her- or himself, that is, with a *human being* as a member of civil society. This commiseration has a political and societal function: Nikolaus Müller-Schöll compares the role of the dramaturge to the that of the police during the rise of bourgeois society.<sup>3</sup> After the sovereign was decapitated or at least had left the stage of representation, there was the need to create new forms of association of the members of civil society and new “techniques of government”—as Joseph Vogl shows in his reading of Lessing in *Calculation and Passion (Kalkül und Leidenschaft)*,<sup>4</sup> referring, like Müller-Schöll, to Michel Foucault's historiography. In theatre and dance, spectators come together to gaze secretly at virtuous maids who are hidden behind an artificial fourth wall and then unite in pity and weeping. The isolated members of civil society that Michel Foucault analyzed as “subjects of interest”<sup>5</sup> are banded together by means of the affect of pity (with their equals, or with themselves), and the dramaturge steers and channels these affects as the flock's herdsman.

Nevertheless, the dramaturge remains some kind of sidekick: in the old days of *Regietheater*, the director often still behaved like the sovereign that had elsewhere disappeared long ago, being moody and ingenious, intrusive and tyrannical. The dramaturge, instead, had the text and the rehearsal schedule at hand, calmed the moods, and communicated with the artistic director, the media, and the audience. However, the administrator or functionary might have always been more powerful as the sovereign her- or himself who, due to his absolute power, is not even able to decide. This is something that we can learn among other things from Walter Benjamin's book on baroque theatre: besides the Janus-faced figure of sovereign and martyr, Benjamin places the *intriguer* that he calls the “forerunner of the ballet master” at the side of the sovereign; the intriguer sees “human emotions as calculable mechanics.”<sup>6</sup> When sovereigns go mad, the administration still has its routines and protocols. The intriguer as well as the ballet master are experts in affective economics. They stay calm and are powerful because they never even want to be in the sovereign's place. Later, Arnold Gehlen will state that institutions provide relief [*Entlastung*] from all the exigencies of modern life.<sup>7</sup> Generally, the institution remains when the sovereign is gone; institutions continue to exist if nobody decides that they should. The dramaturge who is not the sovereign is usually on the institution's side. S/he can try to change it from within, criticize it, but is still tied to its functioning.

But what happens when s/he becomes a *curator*? Of course, this shift shows that contemporary forms of theatre are less and less text-based and are often closer to visual arts than they are to literature. The development of contemporary dance plays an important role here. Dance can critically examine communal and political spatial structures, power and gender relations, and concepts of health, ability, and beauty without a word being said. Spoken language on stage, if it occurs, is just one element among others, and the physical act of speaking can become as visible as the question of who is allowed to speak and who is not. Institutionally, the emergence of the curator in dance and performance arts also has to do with a fundamental shift in the functioning of dramaturgy itself, leading to claims of *postdramaturgy* as the “outcome of manifold conversations of shared experiences.”<sup>8</sup> This change comes with the institutionalization of independent theatre. “Production houses”—the translation offered by the network of seven important German institutions itself<sup>9</sup>—do not have an ensemble; they cooperate with each other, the artists, or groups and their respective dramaturges to acquire funding for productions. Those institutions often undertake efforts to be

rooted in their particular quarter, city, and region, but they act nevertheless in a national and even international frame. They do not show repertoires, but generally pieces that tour several partner institutions. They often host or cooperate with *festivals*, intense get-togethers of the mobile network of professionals and aficionados. We should keep in mind that one of the key endeavors of the unlucky interim artistic director of the Berlin Volksbühne, Chris Dercon, was to replace the dramaturges with curators and to include a lot of dance performances in his program. The protesters from the Berlin Mitte crowd claimed that, in doing so, Dercon somewhat connived with neoliberal capitalism to accelerate the transformation of their neighborhood what was former East Berlin into a multinational tourism destination. The institution of a regular city or state theatre specialized in spoken theatre—with its ensemble, its workshops, and all the expert artisans for costume, lighting, and stage design—suddenly appeared as some kind of bulwark against neoliberal gentrification. The curator became the symbol of an international, soulless post-Fordist capitalism whose actors saw both arts and real estate as mere means of investment.

From Lessing on, the dramaturge was a copy editor: s/he sought to reveal the meaning and the current relevance of a dramatic text or libretto and told the spectators what the story told in it had to do with their own lives. But dance, performance, audio walks, and site-specific works rarely need an excerpt from the drama compiled by a dramaturge. However, there is seldom any performance or dance piece without language, although it does not necessarily have to be spoken on stage: the new formats of theatre and dance which a curator invites, hosts, and accompanies are deeply interwoven with a textual infrastructure of contemporary theatre and dance, an infrastructure that does not only serve to inform the audience about the piece, its (theoretical) background, and its supposed impact, but that is also basically connected to and implemented into the funding system. Valeska Klug has examined some criteria for regional, supra-regional, and national funding in North Rhine Westphalia and Germany in the wake of a professionalization of the independent scene: according to the criteria formulated by the administrations in charge, eligible performances had to be *new* (generally, neither the restaging of an existing production nor the revised submission of a formerly rejected proposal were permitted) and innovative. However, the outcome was to be “projectable, calculable, and describable”<sup>10</sup>—and to be available for evaluation. Klug also observes that the calls very rarely talk about artists but rather of the funding institutions themselves, which enable “innovation and internationalization,” “highlight” themes and issues, “encourage artists,” “initiate” projects, and “accelerate” their development. Artists are invited to “participate.” The calls also outline the expected effects on a “public,” i.e., “public spaces and buildings” that enable the creation of “spaces of cooperation and encounters between different generations, cultures, and social backgrounds.”<sup>11</sup> Klug concludes: “The program itself becomes the subject.”<sup>12</sup> In this cosmos, the dramaturge hired by a company or an artist is often the one who helps them fulfil the various yet monotone requirements of the funding institutions, to provide appropriate wording, and to sketch the desired social and political effects.

With Lessing, the dramaturge emerges as the one who steers the affective economics of the civil society: through his techniques, he brings together its isolated members and unites them as they cry. They see themselves in the characters on stage. In the modern funding system Klug describes, the function of the dramaturge or post-dramaturge somehow has been taken over by the institution itself. The institution reproduces itself—it assembles progressive and innovative fractions of the civil society that claims to be one of the motors of ongoing *development*. What is more, the funding schemes acknowledge that civil society is made up of isolated “subjects of interests”—with their

ideas, their creativity, the desire to innovate and to invent, to optimize, and to develop. The artists who apply are urged to cooperate, yet they all apply in concurrence with others. Here, as in Lessing, the aim is the affective binding of the dispersed “human beings.” Whereas Lessing thought of pity, the institutions rather award innovation and participation. However, the overall task remains the same: uniting civil society. This is the task of the institutions and the (post-)dramaturges: provide it with *content*. S/he embeds the artistic work in a textual infrastructure provided by the institution and kept alive by every contribution from artists. This is not something done *ex post*: the funding procedures decide what project can be produced and what cannot.

What, then, can be the political, social, and aesthetic role of a “post-dramaturge” or a curator—or, even better, a team or collective of them—in contemporary dance, performance, and independent theatre? On the one hand, there is the danger that s/he acts as a ward or a gatekeeper who exercises the epistemic violence of care in deciding what piece is “innovative” or “contemporary” and what piece is not, what applies to the funding criteria (the aesthetic criteria, the political criteria) and what does not. S/he mediates and translates the artistic endeavors that are driven by various imaginary, political, and libidinous forces into something that the institution can develop, that it can work with. This activity can be exclusive on several levels. Theorists, but even more so artistic directors like Matthias Lilienthal, have scrupulously contemplated the ongoing coloniality that a concept like *Theatre of the World* (the idea behind the eponymous festival, *Theater der Welt*) implies: who invites the “world” here and presents its own fenced territory, dependent on raw materials, energy, and labor extracted elsewhere as some kind of neutral space where mankind can unite? What is the “epistemic violence” executed by the European stage: who can appear on such a stage, who is able to speak on it? Is a performance by African dancers “contemporary” enough for a European festival?<sup>13</sup> Exoticism and moral extractivism (that adds the extraction of moral resources to that of commodities) are possible dangers. But the post-dramaturges and curators can be exactly this person—or: the collective dramaturgical and curatorial process in devising a performance can be exactly the procedure—*reflecting* the restrictions, framings, and violence inherent in the process of producing contemporary performance.

In a text from 2017, art theorist Marina Vishmidt examines and announces a shift from “institutional critique” to “infrastructural critique” in the art world: infrastructure, she states, “can be considered a conceptual diagram that enables thought to develop.”<sup>14</sup> Infrastructural critique cuts through this development, making other notions of time possible. This critique necessitates “an engagement with the thoroughly intertwined objective (historical, socio-economic) and subjective (including affect and artistic subjectivization) conditions necessary for the institution and its critique to exist, reproduce themselves, and posit themselves as an immanent horizon as well as transcendental condition.” Hence, infrastructural critique concerning the role of a curator in dance, performance, and theatre does not only address the institution and try to change it from within, but it also cares for the underlying structures (“infra” means “under”) that nourish and supply the institutions. In the first place, these structures are material: stages need electricity, even dancers have to eat, and people should be able to visit the performance in good conditions. But the notion of infrastructure can also be expanded: the institutions also rely on a textual infrastructure that keeps them going. These infrastructures form subjectivities and their ideas of the new and contemporary, they decide on the things you can do and the things you cannot, they ensure the affective organization of capitalist society—or, more precisely, of its well-protected democratic segment that Vishmidt refers to as “the former West”—that needs art to inno-

vate and to develop. When curatorial practices address and try to change the institutions they work in and with, they might only help to optimize them. But they can—and often do—also keep in mind the infrastructures they depend upon; they can interrupt their flows, try out new ways to make them perceivable, ask for the imaginary drive that lets them emerge and the very unequal prices a society is willing to pay for their maintenance. It can work with “the basic, the boring, the mundane, and all the mischievous work done behind the scenes.”<sup>15</sup>



Sandra Chatterjee and Cynthia Ling Lee, *Back to the Beautiful (Water Memories)*, performance produced for group show co-curated by the students of the *Curating in the Performing Arts* university course, 2017, SZENE Salzburg. Photograph by: Hubert Auer.

## Notes

- 1 See Evelyn Deutsch-Schreiner, *Theaterdramaturgie von der Aufklärung bis zur Gegenwart* (Weimar/Vienna: Böhlau, 2016), 154.
- 2 See Evelyn Deutsch-Schreiner, “The Educators of Theatre. Dramaturgy between Enlightenment and Counter-Enlightenment,” in *Dramaturgies in the New Millennium* (Tübingen: Narr, 2014), 39–47: 48.
- 3 See Nikolaus Müller-Schöll, “Polizeiliche und politische Dramaturgie,” in *Postdramaturgien*, eds. Sandra Umathum and Jan Deck (Berlin: Neofelis, 2020), 209–229.
- 4 See Joseph Vogl, *Kalkül und Leidenschaft: Poetik des ökonomischen Menschen* (Zürich, Berlin: diaphanes, 2008), 83–138.
- 5 Michel Foucault, *The Birth of Biopolitics: Lectures at the Collège de France, 1978–1979*, *Houndmills* (UK, New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2008), 274.
- 6 Walter Benjamin, *Origin of the Baroque Trauerspiel*, trans. Howard Eiland (Cambridge, MA, London: Harvard University Press, 2019), 85 et seq.
- 7 See Arnold Gehlen, *Anthropologische und sozialpsychologische Untersuchungen* (Reinbek: Rowohlt, 1986).
- 8 Kirsten Maar, “P.S. — Postscriptum zur Post-Dramaturgie zwischen choreographischer Praxis und der Reflektion von Produktionsverfahren (a Dialogue)” in *Postdramaturgien*, eds. Sandra Umathum and Jan Deck (Berlin: Neofelis, 2020), 165–181: 181.
- 9 See Alliance of International Production Houses, accessed August 8, 2022, <https://en.produktionshaeuser.de/>
- 10 Valeska Klug, “Zwischen Anforderungen und Zuschreibungen. Freie szenischen Künstler\*innen und Künste in Förderdiskursen,” *Cahier d’études germaniques* 80 (2021): 117–120.
- 11 Ibid., 113 et seq. Klug cites various calls and programs.
- 12 Ibid., 114.
- 13 For the question of epistemic violence, see Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, “Can the

Subaltern Speak?," in *Can the Subaltern Speak? Reflections on the History of an Idea*, ed. Rosalind Morris (New York, NY: Columbia University Press, 2010), 21–78 [1999], 237–291 [1988].

**14** Marina Vishmidt, "Between Not Everything and Not Nothing: Cuts Toward Infrastructural Critique," in *Former West: Art and the Contemporary After 1989*, eds. Maria Hlavajova and Simon Sheikh (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), 265–269: 265.

**15** John Durham Peters, *The Marvelous Clouds: Toward a Philosophy of Elemental Media* (Chicago, IL: Chicago University Press, 2015), 33.

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# Replacing Institution with Infrastructure: An Approach to Collective Curating

## Kai van Eikels

A round of curating. Whoever wants to participate gets into the first car of the Ringbahn train that departs at 9pm from Landsberger Allee, on the first Monday of every month. This information has been circulated through online platforms and email, and the fact that the radically open arrangement excludes those who cannot, or do not care to, be punctual is not the least interesting aspect of a collective undertaking named Ying Colosseum, which started in December 2015 and lasted for thirteen months. For the purpose of preparing an exhibition—not in an established gallery but in places like a supermarket car park, a Turkish Café, an abandoned swimming pool, or a heavy metal bar—the assembly had roughly seventy minutes. During this time, Berlin's circle line covers a distance of 37km and calls at twenty-seven stations. Although the following thoughts are not specifically concerned with curating dance, they want to encourage readers to think of curating as a kind of city dance: a curatorial move rather than a protracted process, which employs (let's say, piggybacks on) movements provided by the city. An infrastructural dance.

The areas connected by the Ringbahn (“Mitte,” the gentrified central district that hosts most of the city's well-known art spaces, is not among them) form a characteristic periphery. If infrastructure means a relational setting that comprises technology and people,<sup>1</sup> this train is Berlin's signature piece of infrastructure. The Ying Colosseum experiment offers a materialist answer to a question that is being asked, or tacitly implied, in every curating process: What does it have to do with the city? Art that goes on show “afk”<sup>2</sup> cannot help addressing a public, a collective that is at once local and universal. For the better or worse, its concept of the political still refers to the polis, to the *people who live around here*, from whatever places artists and visitors will actually come flying in. It doesn't matter whether these “people around here” are citizens or expats, travelers or refugees, people who grew up here, who have been stranded here, or happen to be in town for a couple days, as long as one can assume that they are legitimate participants in the city life. And what better place for such an assumption than a transport line that sucks up and spits out diverse crowds! No need to fashion a symbolic-imaginary link between art event and city, as curators regularly feel compelled to do (often resulting in titles and topics that convey but their well-craftedness). The city is already there, at work as a choreographic engine in the material process of human and non-human bodies making an exhibition. Marina Vishmidt claimed that we ought to expand the institutional critique of 1960s and 1970s art into an “infrastructural critique.”<sup>3</sup> Replacing art institutions with infrastructure might be a step in that direction. Using available urban infrastructure and to-whom-it-may-concern online communication allows for an approach that skips institutionalization, as it were. Some people who live around here become the collective subject of curating. All that becoming needs are an initiative, a few rules that will be followed or ignored (likely the former, more on that below), and a social network powerful enough to attract visitors.

Fashioning a captivating symbolic-imaginary relation between an art event and the city where it shall take place is a task that calls for virtuous and virtuosic curatorial



work: let us find a hitherto undiscovered document about the city's cultural history connected to our topic, unearth a forgotten group or association whose name can be filled with new meaning, or juxtapose two terms, one locally specific and one broad and abstract, and see if it triggers people to feel like members of an imagined community! Ying Colosseum's ad-hoc exhibition-making format shows little interest in these linguistic skills and their "servile virtuosity."<sup>4</sup> With the train on its way, there is no time for catering to an imagination that expects to be served just the right kind of homely collectivity, the community in coming, the sufficiently singular plurality, the potentiality beyond potential... Like contact improvisation, the situation calls for instantaneous agreements on the basics. Desires to focus together on a topic of general importance or common concern, to compare personal positions and assess perspectives, to refer to theoretical contexts, may figure into the discussion and complicate the dealings, in an obstructive or productive way. But the bodies that subjectively define themselves by force of these desires are being contained in a vessel whose course is set and which will arrive, barring accidents, exactly as scheduled. Therefore, as heads wiggle on shoulders rocked by the car, gravity and velocity secretly steer the articulation of ideas, the exchange of arguments, and the consensus-finding. The setting delegates authority to the infrastructural environment that is equally exterior to all. By aligning the self-invented rules with the respect that people have for a logistical movement, the initiators cunningly exploit the *infra-* of infrastructure, which tends to escape (critical) attention when it functions smoothly. Once the curatorial journey has been completed, and exhibition title and location have been chosen, the same dynamic is conferred to the exhibition setup: "This information was then passed on to all earlier contributing artists via email so they could take part again, or invite someone else by forwarding the correspondence and a pdf of recommended reading for Ying. Those who confirmed by replying with a name were told simply to meet on the chosen site at 6:45pm. The show would open at 7pm."<sup>5</sup>

The exhibition will thus be what people get together in such a get-together. This eliminates neither questions of competence nor power inequalities in the curating (even though one rule stated that "if the deciding party ran out of time, minority ruled"<sup>6</sup>). But competence, in this case, perhaps consists in an ability to explain something with a few plausible words and gestures to foreigners and friends alike, or present instantly winning visual evidence by showing photos of a site that looks cool, rather than impressing colleagues with one's sophisticated play on a register that's proudly shared among members of the institution. Effective curatorial *talk* (as in jazz musicians or dancers interacting) here requires *topoi koinoi* [commonplaces], in the original sense of the word. And the experiment is possible because in cities like Berlin, where art has advanced to a widespread social practice, there actually exists a *general intellect of curating*, a broadly accessible set of ideas, concepts, terms, arguments, and implicit values, which just needs a situation that allows for its actualization to unfold an anarchic power (a reviewer attested Ying Colosseum a "culture of anarchy comparable to the Situationists playing Pokémon Go").

Circumventing curatorial speak as far as possible, still the Ying initiators strive for precision where they formulate the rules. One could call this an infrastructural-choreographic attitude towards language. Instead of producing discourse (i.e., speech that tries to engage individual subjects, persuading them to congregate into a collective shape as laid out by promising depictions), wording is concerned with constructing an "active form,"<sup>8</sup> an organizational template that operates on the physical level. The well-scaled degree of formalization—which makes participation easy and fun while employing the psychological weight of heavy machinery, precise timetables, and the ingenious

engineering behind them—activates the practical, material collectivity of everyday life. Curating is just a slightly extraordinary context given to this everyday city dance. And the collective design of the event that ensues from such a curatorial ride bears the imprint of a decision that is at once the most vulgar, low-key decision in an urban existence and, every time anew, an avowal of crowd materiality over imagined community: to take the train.

Of course, swapping the meeting room of an art space for an urban transport network does not disengage one entirely from the institutional. The relation between infrastructure and institution has always been complicated, and the public situation encountered on a train, for all its potential to surprise—and annoy—us with chance communication, displays regulatory state power that the bodies have internalized (if not always in the way the government wants them to). However, Ming’s approach manages to instrumentalize the self-control imposed by what everybody knows is appropriate train behavior, in favor of a self-organized transient collective that lets its members be *more and less* disciplined than proper citizens. In some cases, this more-and-less leaves the collective with ideological uncertainties: Is the heavy metal bar that was agreed on as the next site for exhibiting also a meeting place for the right-wing scene? Who should have known, or made sure, in advance? The absence of an individual or collective sovereign in the curatorial move means that the exhibition cannot be a safe event. Participants will need to make up their minds as to whether they prefer the dangers posed by publicly accessible infrastructure or the dangers of institutional closure. To be given an opportunity for thinking about this—in a society, including the art world, that by default has always already opted for the institutional—can hardly be underestimated in its political value.

Rather than an empty gesture towards an “open future,” Ying Colosseum hands down to the afterworld a small excessive part. The curating outlasted one year by one month, just as the Ringbahn needs ten minutes more than the full hour to complete its circle. Happily finite, materialist in practice and attitude, this arrangement does not seek to transfer a messianic agency from the charismatic individual curator to the collective, or outdo the one by the power of the many. It just proposes a good idea for loosely doing things together, applicable to curating dance no less than to the visual arts (a mostly institutional distinction, these days). This idea may be copied, altered, translated into more refined or still rougher approaches. Curating on trains won’t save the world. But it may very well help to make better art shows.

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## Notes

- 1 For people as infrastructure, see AbdouMaliq Simone, “People as Infrastructure: Intersecting Fragments in Johannesburg,” *Public Culture* 16, no. 3 (2004): 407–429.
- 2 Legacy Russell has proposed “afk (away from keyboard)” as a more adequate replacement for “in real life” or “offline,” since being online is obviously a crucial part of our real lives and the communication devices we carry are almost never offline. See Legacy Russell, *Glitch Feminism: A Manifesto* (London: Verso, 2020), 12.
- 3 Marina Vishmidt, “Between not Everything and not Nothing: Cuts towards Infrastructural Critique,” in *The Former West: Art and the Contemporary after 1989*, eds. Maria Hlavajova and Simon Sheik (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2017), 265–268: 265.
- 4 See Paolo Virno, “Virtuosity and Revolution: The Political Theory of Exodus,” in *Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics*, eds. Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt (Minneapolis: UP Minnesota, 1996), 189–212.

**5** Penny Rafferty, “A Culture of Anarchy Comes to a Close with Ying Colosseum,” *AQNB*, January 5, 2017, <https://www.aqnb.com/2017/01/05/a-culture-of-anarchy-comes-to-a-close-with-ying-colosseum-by-penny-rafferty>.

**6** Ibid.

**7** Moritz Gramming, “Ying Colosseum im Blackland,” <https://kubaparis.com/ying-colosseum-im-blackland> (text has been removed).

**8** Keller Easterling uses Bruno Latour’s term “active form” in her reflection on infrastructure power to designate a technical-social device that, while it may have been designed as a solution for a specific problem, has a disposition exceeding that function. See Keller Easterling, *Extrastatecraft: The Power of Infrastructure Space* (London: Verso, 2014), 14–22.

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