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Dance [and] Theory

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Intertwinings: The Dis/Positions of Dance Aesthetics

SABINE HUSCHKA

It is the contention of the panel ‘Aesthetics’ that the relationship between the art of dance and the field of aesthetics has unjustly been neglected in the last decades. What have emerged instead are isolated theoretical, philosophical and critical discourses on dance that do not pose the question what makes dance into an art form.¹ Performing practices and artistic strategies of embodiment are often explored from a cultural studies or philosophical point of view, thus pushing the boundaries of the discipline. As a consequence, most contributions argued that performative dance was a culturally shaped bodily practice. The predominantly Anglo-American approaches and concepts tended to imply ‘anti-aesthetics’ attitude, analyzing the body merely as the reflecting surface of deeper socio-cultural patterns. Artistic practices, movement techniques and choreographic procedures were conceived in terms of cultural production processes constituting (ethnic) identities and gendered subjects. Aesthetic experience and the key question of “how art presents itself to us” (Küpper/Menze 2003: 8), which Joachim Küpper and Christoph Menke take as vital in their introduction to Dimensionsen ästhetischer Erfahrung (Dimensions of aesthetic experience, Küpper/ Menke 2003) rarely came into focus. From a philosophical and historical perspective, the panellists Juliane Rebentisch and Gerald Siegmund both have provided detailed accounts of how and why aesthetics should be reformulated as aesthetic experience, stressing that aesthetic research does not necessarily depend on the concept of artistic autonomy. Following this fruitful and complex discussion, which seeks to define the aesthetics of dance as a practice-formed mode of reflection – a model long overdue in German academic discourse – I shall single out a few aspects worth examining.

The recent trend in dance studies, to draw once more on the notion of the aesthetic, has two important consequences. On the one hand, the aspect of the beau-

¹ One exception is certainly Gerald Siegmund’s worthwhile attempt at re-conceptualizing and challenging conventional aesthetic figures of thought. With reference to absence as a constitutive element of presence, he provides a fresh view on performing arts and aesthetic experience (Siegmund 2006).
tiful in art is revived by referring to the creative potential of the bodies in performance. On the other hand, research on dance becomes firmly grounded on aesthetic perception in the sense of kinaesthetic empathy. Against the backdrop of neurological findings and technological processes, recent studies have highlighted the kinaesthetic response of the spectators, defined as affective and aesthetic experiences of pleasure. Recurring on Theodor Lipp’s psychological notion of empathy (Lipps 1903/1906) and John Martin’s concept of metakinesis (Martin 1965 [1933]), a new dance aesthetics is about to develop emphasizing the inter-sensorial potential and effects of artistic movements in performance. By incorporating hitherto neglected modalities of perception conceived as the sensory experience of empathizing kinaesthetically with the dancers, the interactive process of understanding and theorizing dance is extended to include the physical dimension. In contrast to the theories of the 1930s, however, this novel approach does not advocate a universal model of communication between bodies, but operates on the basis of correspondence and imitation. I shall address this issue below.

In a dance aesthetic perspective, another vital question must be asked: How and in what way can kinaesthetic, empathy-driven approaches help us to better conceive the idea of the ‘other reality,’ which is, according to Siegmund (Siegmund in this volume: 87), always immanent in the materialisation of bodies in performance as the experience of difference? In other words: What is the function of the kinaesthetic within a framework of aesthetic experience, if the kinaesthetic is defined as vitalising impact on the part of the spectator? Will such a theory cut itself off from a rational approach grounded in understanding? Or does it, on the contrary, add an important aspect to the concept of aesthetic experience by paving the way of a practice-formed theorizing in which the synthesis of the reflective subject and the object prompting questions is finally achieved? There is no easy answer to it, but I shall take a closer look at the potential of the kinaesthetic to open up a pathway to aesthetic research that critically reflects dance as an embodied process.

**DIS/POSITIONS – DANCE AESTHETICS**

In order to theorize dance as an embodied process, an aesthetic approach based on experience is needed. We are not only confronted with the phenomenological interrelations of self and other immanent in any representation of bodies in per-

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2 The research project *Watching Dance-Kinesthetic Empathy* is currently carried out at the School of Languages, Linguistics and Cultures at the University of Manchester, led by Dee Reynolds. For the research design see Watching Dance Mind Map, www.watchingdance.org/Mind_Map/Interactivemindmap/index.html (Reynolds 2007). Susan Foster’s recent publications also explore the relationship of choreography, kinesthetics and empathy (Foster 2011).
formance. Understanding dance as an embodied process also implies the shifting
of meaning processes onto the plane of physically structured experience without,
however, recurring on the idea of sameness or resemblance on a practical level.
It rather is the difference, the un-likeness of embodied processes that prompts the
observers to reflection. Aesthetic experience unfolds from a mixed mode of theore-
tical and practical perception of the object and operates on the basis of difference.
Dance performance is thus structured by a dispositif of perception which
has physical as well as theatrical aspects. Linked to material conditions, this dispositif is constrained by historically determined ways of arranging and guiding
the gaze of the spectator and eliciting affective and interpretive processes, thus
articulating a – as Siegmund has shown (Siegmund in this volume) – multidimen-
sional reality in its own right. As an arena where movements are created, ar-
ranged in spatiotemporal sequences and integrated into a theatrical order of visi-
bility, dance materializes as a temporally structured event which is, by its nature,
transitory. As a dramatic event, a potentially narrative, but doubtlessly composit-
torial aspect is inherent in any choreography. Most of all, the choreographed
hence intentionally designed theatricality of bodies in performance, is ultimately
based on an aesthetic transposition of physical movements.

This rather complex, theatrically framed physical disposition of dance has
always unfailingly raised the question whether dance is an art genre in its own
right with its own distinct perceptual dispositif. Which framework should be ap-
plied to describe, analyze and interpret dance? In an aesthetic perspective, the
modalities of understanding must be clearly specified: As what exactly does
dance enter into our perception? Historical as well as cultural norms and disposi-
tions govern our perception according to the sensuous, affective and interpretive
paradigms of the time. That means, aesthetics always articulate historically vari-
able methodologies for determining what counts as valid perception or under-
standing.3

In an analogy, this might prove equally true for the semantic relation between
‘dance’ and ‘aesthetics’ – for example in the compound ‘dance aesthetics.’ On
the one hand, dance aesthetics means reviewing, analyzing and interpreting
dance decoded as a ‘genitivus objectives.’ As the object of a reflective process, it
is being talked and written about, and in that sense, aesthetics involves the objec-
tivation, verbalization and textualization of physical movements and bodies in
performance. Dance becomes a reading matter. On the other hand, dance aesthet-
ics can literally signify the reverse, in the sense of the ‘genitivus subjectivus.’ As

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3 Until the 20th century, dance aesthetics followed enlightenment conceptions dating
back to the ballet en action, assuming that dance was an expressive art form which
communicated psychic moods by somatic practices. Jean Georges Noverre’s reforms
of dancing and ballet introduced aesthetics of presence and established a different or-
der in the ‘knowledge culture.’ From then on the ‘emotionally moving body in mo-
tion’ became the prominent mode of performance. Its momentary nature made dance
into a transitory, ephemeral form of art (Huschka 2009a, 2009b).
the specific quality of dance can never be fully represented in language and since an object-like status of dance is not given because of its transitory nature, ‘dance aesthetics’ cannot really refer back to an entity, but only to a methodology of describing and analyzing movement techniques, choreography and staging design. In short, dance aesthetics is accomplished by scrutinizing the formal qualities of the dance performance and the kind of knowledge it generates.  

Although this distinction introduces a novel perspective on thinking dance, the perceptually relevant question of how art of dance presents itself to us remains unsolved. Yet it becomes all the more important because dance operates under different modalities of understanding, incorporating the ‘différence’ between knowledge derived from bodies and movements, and knowledge derived from language and texts. If aesthetic experience means opening up to embodied aspects of reflection as access points to the aesthetic, it is important to keep in mind that

“what is being shown in or through the aesthetic object is not what can be understood in the sense of meaning concepts, but what remains to be understood (yet never will be) as a consequence of the disintegration of aesthetic communication and understanding.” (Menke 1991: 81, translated by B. Scifried)

The concept of kinaesthetic empathy seems promising if we want aesthetic theory to include the physical dimension. It might even revive a modernist utopia, because it brings into focus a transcultural and transhistorical, communicative potential of mankind that bodies in performance can set free (Foster 2011: 14).  

Defining and understanding dance as kinesthetic experience means steering the attention to a specific perceptual modality that can initiate critical reflection.

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4 The distinction between ‘genitus objectivus’ and ‘genitus subjectivus’ is borrowed from Jörg Huber. Drawing on the semantic presuppositions of genitus subjectivus, the art critic outlines an epistemology of the visual that rejects the language- and text-based knowledge culture in art. (Huber 2007)

5 “[D]ance studies are always confronted with the epistemological problem of analyzing a dynamic form of art. That means, one must try to get a hold on the transitory, ephemeral, volatile, absent somehow, and fix it, freeze it in order to conceptually grasp it.” (Brandstetter/Klein 2007: 12) Cf. Brandstetter 2005.

6 Es geht um die Anerkennung, dass “das im ästhetischen Objekt Gezeigte nicht das ist, was es im Sinne eines Begriffs ästhetischer Bedeutung zu verstehen gibt, sondern was als Resultat des Zerfalls ästhetischen Verstehens immer erst noch wieder ästhetisch verstanden werden muß (und nie verstanden werden kann).” (Menke 1991: 81)

7 One of the leading research questions is: “Are there ways in which a shared physical semiosis might enable bodies, in all their historical and cultural specificity, to communicate with one another? Are there techniques of knowledge production that invite us to imagine the other without presuming knowledge of the other?” (Foster 2011: 14)
Even though the access points to aesthetic understanding are (individual) physical responses to choreographed movements, the difference between self and other, the visible and the palpable, between what can be said and what can only be felt, is never blurred. On the contrary, it is precisely this difference which recurrently prompts further acts of perception and understanding, “that is why we sometimes return to works of art as though to good friends” (Rebentisch in this volume: 95), as Juliane Rebentisch has dry-wittedly remarked in this volume. The crucial question is thus: What is the benefit of introducing kinaesthetic empathy as an approach to aesthetic experience in a dance context?

**The Kinaesthetic as a Cue to the Aesthetic — John Martin**

Current research on kinaesthetic empathy as a sensory-driven approach to knowledge and understanding is firmly rooted in scientific evidence from neuroscience. In comparison, John Martin’s aesthetic approach to modern dance seemed much more fanciful, as he himself acknowledges in a comment on his suggestion to use kinaesthetic understanding as a point of departure for aesthetic experience: “When reduced to theoretical statement, all this sounds a little strange and perhaps even esoteric, yet it is simple and eminently familiar in practice” (Martin 1989: 19). Developed from the perceptual concept of ‘inner mimicry,’ the American dance critic heavily relied on the psychological and kinesiological research of Theodor Lipps or Mabel Ellsworth Todd. In *The Thinking Body* (Todd 1968) Todd points out that observers tend to empathize with motor activities of others, mirroring neuromuscular patterns as though the movements were their own. This imitation seems to reflect a kind of somatic understanding, a subconscious ‘movement intelligence,’ which would explain many remarkable neurobiological phenomena such as the bodily ability to respond to sensory input from the mental or physical environment by kinaesthetically coordinating balance, muscular tension, gravity orientation and posture. With regard to dance performance and its constitutive feature of physically bringing together dancers and spectators, Martin translates the kinaesthetic experience into a model of understanding: metakinesis is based on an inter-sensory experience of movements. By physically transposing the muscular tensions of the dancers to the spectators,

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9 During the 1920s and 1930s Todd taught kinesiology and body therapy at the Columbia University Teachers College in New York (cf. Todd 1968 [1937]).
the expressive intention of movements is perceived and identified, while motor activities are mirrored and echoed kinaesthetically. On an inter-muscular basis, the emotive content of the movements is thus directly conveyed.

From a dance aesthetics point of view, however, this is only the first step. To be able to qualify the performance, the next step must involve analysis in order to determine its character as art. According to Martin, the compositional structure is the key to the felicitous communication of emotive content.

"He [the choreographer, SH] must organize his material so that it will induce those specific reactions in us that will communicate his purpose. [...] With the desire for communication, then there comes the necessity for form and the beginning of art." (Martin 1989: 24; 59 et seq.)

In a sense, the kinaesthetic is the ‘sounding board’ of the aesthetic judgment articulated in the formal analysis of the choreography. Dance can only be characterized as art, if the internal disposition initiating the movement is successfully projected as the ‘inner mood’ of the choreography. Its theatrically framed dispositif of perception is shaped by clear compositional principles and rules. Dance is an arrangement of coherent dramatic and musical elements consisting of spatially dynamic, rhythmical movement sequences and selected phrases and movement motifs, which may only divert in different directions, if the heterogeneous motifs do not occur simultaneously. In brief, it is precisely in the form-giving process of choreographing a performance that the inner motivation structuring the movements manifests itself.

Martin’s somatic approach thus prefigures an ultimately universal model of communication that incorporates the kinaesthetic dimension, without, however, offering a theoretical outline of aesthetic experience. What it does take up, though, is the modernist idea of dance as a generic art form in its own right. In the final analysis, dance aesthetics depart from a formal description of the artistic means employed in bodies and movements and their arrangement in time and space, to evaluate dance as a coherent compositional system of motivated movements. In this regard, kinaesthetic perception provides a point of departure for, a cue to further reflective processes and is not merely a subjective experiential moment on the part of the spectator granting his or her participation in the artistic production process. On the contrary, kinaesthetic empathy is a perceptual cue granting reflective access to the artwork, which, by means of metakinesis, reveals the emotive substructures of its choreographic system.
AESTHETIC EXPERIENCE: PASSAGE AND RESPONSE TO MOVING BODIES

If we define dance as the art of movement, then the temporal dimension and its transient mode of expression become crucial to theory construction. Perception and aesthetic reflection take place against the background of a transitory, momentary and quite literally ‘passing’ form of art. Dance unfolds and elapses in time and is therefore, in the true sense of the Latin word ‘transitorius,’ “a thoroughfare, proper for passing through” (Wahrig-Redaktion 2009). The temporal and compositional structure of dance contains experiential key moments that – albeit transitory – carry a reflective potential. By stressing that aesthetic experience has its own time that is not chronometrically identical with the duration of a performance or dependent on the physical presence of the recipient, Juliane Rebentisch already points to this important fact (Rebentisch in this volume). The transitory opens up a passage, lets us pass through a transitory moment of experience and reflection, from which aesthetic knowledge can unfold. This would also imply that the perceptive frames and discursive practices structuring the aesthetics of dance are themselves ‘thoroughfares’ and passages constituting the object of perception against the backdrop of individual. These frames and practices are also performatively created, transient and passing kinaesthetic moments that give rise to meaning and signification processes. In opening up the possibility of ‘passing through,’ the transitory provides a productive experiential access to knowledge.
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Both the identity of dance and that of theory are at risk as soon as the two intertwine. This anthology collects observations by choreographers and scholars, dancers, dramaturges and dance theorists in an effort to trace the multiple ways in which dance and theory correlate and redefine each other: What is the nature of their relationship? How can we outline a theory of dance from our particular historical perspective which will cover dance both as a practice and as an academic concept? The contributions examine which concepts, interdependencies and discontinuities of dance and theory are relevant today and promise to engage us in the future. They address crucial topics of the current debate in dance and performance studies such as artistic research, aesthetics, politics, visuality, archives, and the »next generation«.