

H-Net Reviews

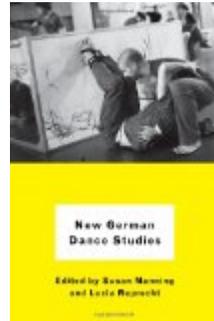
in the Humanities & Social Sciences

Susan Manning, Lucia Ruprecht, eds. *New German Dance Studies*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2012. 296 pp. \$80.00 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-252-03676-7; \$30.00 (paper), ISBN 978-0-252-07843-9.

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The Movement of History in the Movement of Bodies

Since the 1970s and 1980s, when Pina Bausch and other adherents of *Tanztheater* attracted global attention for their ambitious and innovative efforts to dramatize the social and historical encoding of bodily movement, German dance culture has challenged the American construction of dance modernism that prevailed even in Germany in the decades immediately following World War II. Indeed, since the 1980s, Germany has competed well with the United States to become the world center of the most adventurous creativity in the broad realm of “modern dance.” The German *Tanztheater* movement reawakened an intense appreciation for the astonishing achievements of the huge dance culture of the Weimar Republic, which in the four decades after 1933 the guardians of dance culture seemed to regard as evidence of an aberrant national character. But *Tanztheater* not only established a vibrant connection of contemporary dance to “Weimar dance”; it also asserted that German modern dance was unique insofar as it revealed the movement of history within the movement of bodies.

Susan Manning and Lucia Ruprecht contend that this kinetic relation between dance and history requires scholarship to move beyond disciplinary perspectives and embrace *Kulturwissenschaft*, by which Manning proposes that “new” research on dance contributes to a larger understanding of “cultures of the body” (p. 2). “Dance’s engagement with its status as an art based on physical memory thus feeds into a research focus on cultural memory within the humanities and humanis-

tic social sciences”—meaning that “new” dance and dance scholarship understand “cultural heritage as something passed on from body to body” (p. 9). To support this contention, Manning and Ruprecht have compiled fifteen essays on a wide range of themes and personalities in German dance culture from the mid-nineteenth century to the present. Only three of the fifteen authors are male, so perhaps it is not surprising that the “newness” of German dance studies entails an emphatically female understanding of history. Although the book does not make clear how, if at all, this understanding differs from a male understanding of history, the ratio of male to female authors, while very similar to the ratio of men to women in the realm of professional dance itself, is fairly predictable and not so “new” in relation to dance studies. What is clear, though, is that the book and its authors understand dance history entirely through the achievements of individual artists. Each chapter deals with an artist or two, and the reader understands that “dance’s engagement with its status as an art” means looking at the history of German dance as a set of discrete moments in the diverse careers of dancers and choreographers, from Lola Montez in the nineteenth century to Sasha Waltz and Martin Nachbar in the twenty-first century (p. 9). The book does not provide any chapters that articulate an institutional perspective on dance or clarify the social or cultural impact of German dance or dance in Germany. No chapter offers data about audiences for dance in any decade or data about audience demographics or data about public investment in dance, despite the fact

that during the great era of Weimar dance, public investment in dance was limited to the opera ballet companies while nowadays almost every dance performance in Germany receives a subsidy. No chapter offers data about the number of dancers in Germany or their distribution throughout the country nor information about the scope of dance pedagogy in Germany or the extent to which dance of any sort is studied. Also lacking are the relationships between pedagogical institutions and performing institutions and institutional relations between dance and technology, music, costume, or publicity. In the final chapter of the book, Gabriele Klein introduces a “theory of cultural translation in dance,” by which she means a set of statements or assertions regarding the social conditions that allow “global narratives [to] homogenize the cultural disparity of dances in different national cultures” (p. 256). While it is probably true that “a myriad of popular dances of the twentieth century are hybrid forms of dances, which developed from the tensions of regionalization, globalization, and renationalization” (p. 250), the language of the essay is so abstract that it is difficult to grasp how actual bodies “translate” (as opposed to imitate) the movements and rhythms of foreign dances and thus “reinvent dance as a universal language” (p. 251). In other words, the book treats the history of German dance as largely a matter of interpreting the responses of particular choreographers to the political or cultural circumstances of moments in which they lived.

Given this bias, the essays are uniformly good and rich in illuminating historical detail. Christina Thurner, focusing on the theoretical writings of the choreographer Jean-Georges Noverre, argues that, beginning in the eighteenth century, with efforts to “reform” ballet, a confused discourse emerged in which Noverre’s call for dance that came out of unique individual experiences became overtaken by pedagogical principles that compelled dance to embody a “universal language” of movement that discarded individual and cultural differences in the structuring of aesthetic kinesis. Claudia Jeschke explains how the Irish dancer Lola Montez, having become a German countess as a result of her eventually catastrophic affair with King Ludwig I of Bavaria, successfully appropriated a Spanish identity by devising an exotic form of “Spanish” dance that served to demonstrate her power to shape her image as a “global personality.”

Rudolf Laban receives attention from Susanne Franco in an essay about his hardly successful relationship to film. Very little of Laban’s prodigious choreographic and pedagogic work appears on film, in spite of his persistent efforts to align himself with film producers through

scenarios he wrote and to write about the medium’s possibilities for dance. Franco does not explain why Laban’s charismatic and persuasive personality, which served his huge ambitions so well in relation to so many other opportunities, was apparently not helpful in realizing every film project he proposed. But she does make good use of his writings about and for film to show how his thinking about film strengthened and clarified his “vision” of dance as a modernist form of art.

Dancer-educator Gret Palucca receives contrasting treatment in two essays. Susan Funkenstein discusses Palucca’s collaborations with the Bauhaus from 1925 to 1930, when her exuberant image of the body in motion fit well with the efforts of visual artists like Wassily Kandinsky, László Moholy-Nagy, the Feininger brothers, and the female Bauhaus contingent, especially Marianne Brandt, to construct a new image of modernity built out of a new, kinetic image of the female body. However, in her article on the “politics of East German dance,” Marion Kant presents a much more subdued assessment of Palucca’s contribution to dance. Palucca, Kant contends, accommodated the communist regime as much as she accommodated the Nazi regime to achieve a highly privileged identity within the society, even if her achievements as an artist lacked distinction and constituted a retrograde influence on dance culture. Indeed, the most exciting essays in the anthology are those that examine dance culture in the East German state. Kant, a citizen of that state, offers a rather dour overview of the careers of Palucca, Marianne Vogelsang, Jean Weidt, and the powerful dance critic Fritz Böhme, with Palucca making cynical compromises with the regime, Vogelsang and Weidt betrayed by the regime, and Böhme negotiating with the regime without even pretending to repent his enthusiasm for National Socialism. A somewhat more positive assessment comes from Franz Anton Cramer, who describes the evolution of *Tanztheater* at Berlin’s Komische Oper between 1966 and 1989 in relation to the tenets of socialist realism. He explains how the ballet company, guided by choreographer Tom Schilling, preserved a political significance for dance while incorporating a sophisticated aesthetic “complexity”—that is, an “unrealistic” stylization of movement and narrative organization. Then Jens Richard Giersdorf considers the representation of the East German experience after reunification by contrasting the Western view of that experience in Sasha Waltz’s *Allee der Kosmonauten* (1996) with the Eastern view assumed by Jo Fabian’s *Pax Germania* (1997), and he observes that whereas Waltz treated both dancers and audience as passive figures in relation to East

German history, Fabian developed a more imaginative, interactive relation between audience and dancers to represent the power of historical pressures to move bodies. The most insightful (and stirring) moment in the book is Giersdorf's description of the movement, the collective choreography, of many bodies from the Eastern sector to the Berlin Wall on November 10, 1989, for at that moment everyone seemed aware of how a new movement of their bodies now determined history as much as historical circumstances had previously determined an older and more constricted way of moving.

Three essays focus on the different experiences of three German émigré women. Kate Elswit tells the not particularly happy story of Valeska Gert's efforts, as an exile from Nazi Germany, to establish her grotesque, satirical cabaret art in the United States, and then, when the war was over, to re-establish herself in Germany. For Elswit, Gert was always a "peripheral" figure in dance culture no matter where she lived, an embodiment of estranged "otherness." But it does seem that Gert after 1931 was more estranged from the time in which she lived than from the place in which she lived, since no matter where she went, her audience evaluated her in relation to the peculiar, "aggressive" appeal she exerted during the Weimar Republic. Karen Mozingo recounts the happier story of the clown dancer Lotte Goslar, whose fairytale dances for American audiences vividly dramatized the power of un-ideal or marginalized bodies to defy destinies imposed upon them by historical or cultural agendas. Goslar developed a peculiarly German aesthetic, unperturbed by her American experience, sexually ambiguous, yet probably capable of prospering in any non-Germanic environment. More complex is the story of Hanya Holm, a student of Mary Wigman who sought to establish a Wigman franchise in New York City in 1931. Tresa Randall explains that Holm remained emotionally attached to Wigman and Germany even after 1933, despite constant pressure from the New York dance community to sever her ties with her teacher and her homeland. Only when Holm brought her dance company to Colorado in 1936 did she find a way in which to articulate a uniquely "American" spirit of dance. But the implication is that she found this new spirit, a new idea of "community," only by emancipating herself from the constraining and even stifling political sensibility defining the New York dance community.

The later essays deal with German dance culture since the emergence of the great choreographer Pina Bausch, with some emphasis on the achievements of foreign artists working in the German cultural sphere. Sabine

Huschka describes the differences between Bausch and Wigman in the use of bodily movement to represent profound emotional states, with Wigman ultimately obsessed with the showing the "ecstasy of power" and reaching an "absolute" state of transcendence (p. 196), while Bausch saw deeply emotional experience as arising out of a gathering tension between an internal momentum, a desire, and the resistance to it exerted by an external set of conditions that treat any such momentum as disruptive and destructive. Gerald Siegmund describes a performance of the Frankfurt choreographer William Forsythe's fascinating 2005 dance, *Human Writes*, which involves dancers and spectators attempting to write words from the Universal Declaration of Human Rights on different surfaces using different parts of their bodies and unusual movements to inscribe the words, actions often further complicated by other performers who try to inhibit or control the writing body. *Human Writes* strives to embed the notion of a human "right" into the power to write. Siegmund argues that the piece effectively demonstrates that "the body is articulate precisely at the point of breakdown of meaningful relations, when it ceases to become an image," (p. 214) and thus becomes the basis for a breakthrough in choreographic imagination. Yvonne Hardt provides a chapter on how four postmodern European choreographers "quote" from different categories of dance, including ballet, modern dance, and pop culture forms of dance, in attempting to produce revised perceptions of history or "reconstructions" of it, with Martin Nachbar incorporating writing and speech into a constant reworking of his 2000-09 piece *Urheben Aufheben*, which blurs distinctions between dance, lecturing about dance, and experimental activity, so that the movement of the body operates in relation to reflection about the movement and transparently links movement creativity to learning. Maaïke Bleeker pursues this theme even further with a chapter entitled "Lecture Performance as Contemporary Dance," in which she appraises Croatian dancer-choreographer Ivana Müller's 2004 piece *How Heavy Are My Thoughts*, wherein the dancer, Müller, does not appear and instead another person, one Bill Aitchison, faces the audience and explains why Müller cannot appear as a result of being "stuck" in her experiment to "weigh" her thoughts (p. 232). But the description of Müller's piece, wherein the movement or "weight" of the dancer's thinking is filtered through the movement and language of another body in another space altogether, is simply a basis for a larger rumination on the relation between thinking and bodily movement in a postmodern mode, so that lecture performance is understood as a powerful opportunity for

revealing the transferring movement of subjectivity and thinking from one body to another.

Manning and Ruprecht have done an excellent job of editing the volume. The writing in all the essays is consistently engaging, pulsating with freshness of perception,

and very well documented with abundant and quite valuable endnotes. The book will easily find an appreciative audience with both undergraduate and graduate students in the performing arts as well as with scholars of dance history and of European modernism.

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