

Reenacting Modernity: Fabian Barba's *A Mary Wigman Dance Evening* (2009)

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To reenact nine solos Mary Wigman performed during her first U.S. tour (1930–31), Fabian Barba establishes a contract with the audience based on representational codes of modernist dance in the early twentieth century. As one enters the theater, a little program is found on one's seat with the intended course of the evening. The program mentions the place and date of the reenactment—in German, with an English translation, as it might have been during the American tours—but not the year. Reading it, we learn that six solos, *Aus dem Tanzzyklus "Schwingende Landschaft"* (From the Dance Cycle "Shifting Landscape"), dated 1929, will be performed. There will be an eight-minute intermission after which three other solos are to follow: two from *Visions* and one from *Celebration*. The program is printed in the typography of those days and the contractual agreement of the dance concert—written in small letters as is usually the case with contracts—is indicated at the bottom: "The audience is kindly asked not to leave the room during the intermission. At the end of the recital and upon demand from the public, two dances can be shown again as 'encores.'"

One might think that the carefully reconstructed reenactment would make for an untroubled viewing experience, a seamless perception of the Wigman idiom. Already after the first solo, however—and this is the choreographer's intention—the spectator is somewhat taken aback by the historical distance s/he encounters in the performance. Apparently, the spectator is not acquainted with the modernist representational codes. After the first solo, Barba/Wigman performs a bowing gesture in order to receive applause, but the audience hesitates for a few seconds. We realize that we are not used to applauding after only two minutes of dancing (some of the solos are quite short). The spectators gradually grow into their role of an audience of the 1930s, however, and after two or three solos, they clap enthusiastically at the right time. But after four or five solos, confusion crops up again. Some start to clap enthusiastically right after the solo, that is, before the lights have come up for Barba/Wigman to bow. When Barba/Wigman *does* bow, as a signal to receive the applause, the audience realizes it has been scrambling the codes again, lost as it was in the irrelevant conventions of contemporary spectatorship.

During the musical intermezzi—another convention of the period, which allows for the dancer to change costumes—piano music is played. The recorded sound is muffled, so that some members of the audience are tempted to talk or chat before the next solo starts. Others see this intermezzo as part of the performance, however, and express their disapproval. The audience is split during the musical intermezzi into several camps: those who comment on each other's behavior by shushing, or commenting under their breath, and others who remain silent and return to their program in the hope of finding clues to proper behavior. What Barba does here, in fact, is to extract new percepts and affects from what are normally habitual procedures—unconscious habits of perception, memory, recognition,

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Figure 1. Program of Fabian Barba's A Mary Wigman Dance Evening at Festspielhaus Hellerau (Germany), December 11, 2009.



Figure 2. Program of Fabian Barba's A Mary Wigman Dance Evening at Kaaitheater, Brussels (Belgium), February 5, 2010.

and agreement—and make the spectator see, feel, and think in unforeseen ways, as far as perceiving reenacted dance material is concerned. From this ambivalent perception, this split encounter with the quoted historical dance material, the spectator emerges refreshed as if endowed with a sharpened optic or nervous system; s/he has become aware of the contemporary lens through which reenactments are being perceived.

Barba's reenactment of the Wigman idiom highlights the corporeal gap with the archival material. In relocating the Wigman archive in/onto his own body, in transferring the extant visual sources into an embodied presentation, the corporeal memory of the performer is not deleted. André Lepecki suggests that "a body may have always already been nothing other than an archive" (2010, 34); it constantly gathers techniques, movements, habits, bits and pieces of repertoire that are being stored for later use. Barba does not conceal the fact that he is a young man, dancing the solos of a woman. The Wigman idiom dialogues in a transparent way with the living archive of the performer's body; his physicality as a male dancer, his habits, his training in Quito (Ecuador) and P.A.R.T.S. (Brussels, Belgium). Traces of his early training in modern dance in Ecuador appear visually in the intense gaze, a particular use of breathing while dancing, and the expressive, but technically precise and controlled gestures. This bears close resemblance to German *Ausdruckstanz*. His technical training at P.A.R.T.S. generated the skills of a thinking performer. On the one hand, the resemblance with Wigman is striking; the poses, the muscular qualities of *Ausdruckstanz*, the similar haircut, the costumes. For a few moments it is as if the icon Mary Wigman has returned to life, as if her ghost had never lost track of time. But then, you perceive the large feet—larger than the average size of a female's foot, anyway—the empty bosom, the broad-shouldered torso . . . and you are catapulted away from your own mental image or cliché of the way you remember Mary Wigman—or rather, the way the icon Mary Wigman has been mediatized, especially through photographs.

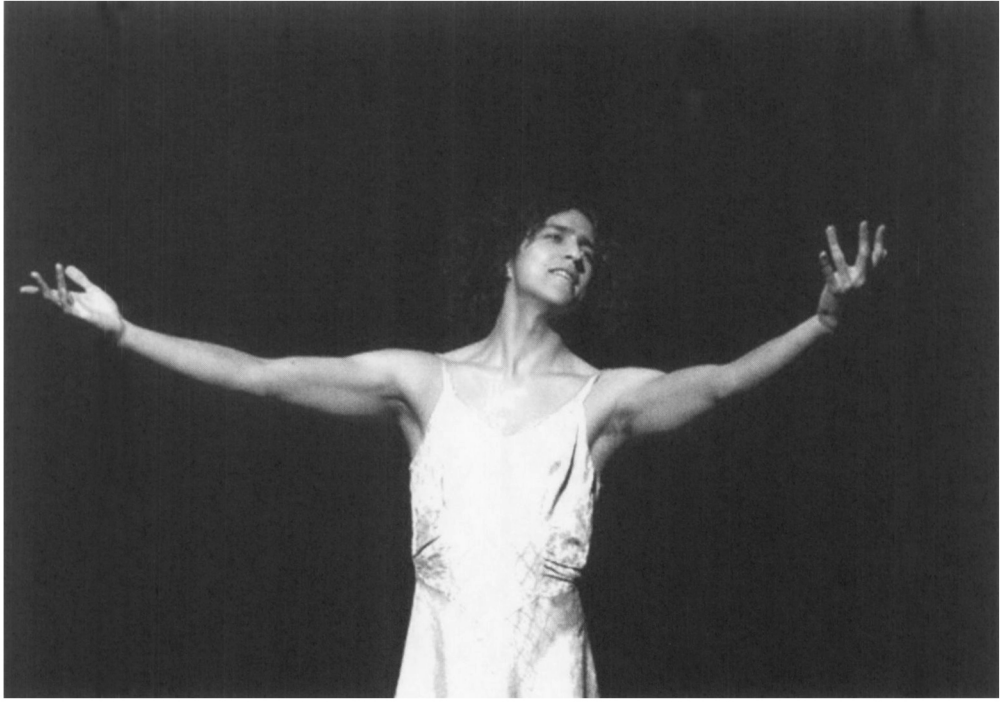


Photo 1. Fabian Barba bowing for applause in *A Mary Wigman Dance Evening* (2009). Photo: Bart Grietens.

The Photograph as Relic

I would like to draw an analogy between this provocative archival gap willfully endorsed by reenactment as we are describing it here—as Barba theorizes it in and through his performance—and the phenomenon of the photograph itself—icon, flat image, cliché—that was the starting point of Barba’s project but also its potential aporia. The project of reconstruction, as Barba discusses it, challenges the dancer to recover corporeality from flatness. Francis Bacon has noted how “the photo tends to crush sensation onto a single level and is powerless to put into sensation the difference of constitutive levels (Bacon cited in Deleuze 2005a, 64). For Roland Barthes, “with the photography we enter into the flat death” (1982, 92). The irony of the photographic image, however, is that the flat image also functions as an “emphatic marker”; it invites to “the imaginative projection of one’s own consciousness into another being” (Liss 1998, 7). The “intractable reality” (Barthes 1982, 119) of some photographic images seems, indeed, to be imprinted in our collective memory, and some photos even come to stand for an entire historical event: they have become icons. Being in constant circulation, photographs hence encourage a short-circuited thinking. The photographic image has become an “iconic cliché” (Vos 2004, 176). Gilles Deleuze’s use of the concept of the *cliché* is of particular interest here. Deleuze plays on the double meaning of *cliché* in French, which indicates both the reproductive mechanism at the basis of photography and at the basis of stereotyped thinking. A cliché denotes an image or an idea that has lost the force of its originality through overuse. Central to Deleuze’s thinking on photography is that the use of clichés entails “a particularly dangerous form of short-circuited thinking and representation, since its chemically based realism gives it an air of authenticity, of innocent directness that anchors and supports all its stereotyping” (Polan 1996, 245).

In *Kodak and the Lens of Nostalgia*, Nancy Martha West aptly observes that responses to photography in the early to mid-nineteenth century were framed by discourses of death and mortality. Thomas Carlyle, for example, perceived in the photograph a mirror-like reflection of his own mortality (cited in West 2000, 143). This perception of early photography is parallel to what Cathy Davidson calls the “commodified redaction of immortality” or “the comfortable belief that we can somehow envelop the past in the present by commodifying, domesticating, beautifying it” (cited in West 2000, 142–43). The “modern” reception of the photograph as the “residue or dead shell” (2000, 144) was at the same time injected with the nostalgic

desire to invest the material remains of the photograph with a spiritual aura. The photograph as icon is celebrated as “something spiritually transcendent” (2000, 145).

This notion of the photograph as relic, possessing a spiritual aura, is perhaps behind the reception and circulation of photographs of star dancers in the modern era. Capitalist society cultivated the iconographic power of images in order to endow the flat, mechanically reproduced photograph with a uniquely spiritual potency. In a mechanically reproduced reality, the aura may be lost, but the iconic cliché becomes part and parcel of an industry, behind which lie reproduction technologies with economic interests. This is a paradoxical structure of modernity. As Roland Barthes has pointed out, photographs are in fact banal and inherently valueless: “Attacked by light, by humidity, it fades, weakens, vanishes; there is nothing left to do but throw it [the photograph] away” (1982, 93).

The German tobacco industry aided in sustaining a spiritual aura about what was in fact so obviously an everyday and perishable product of capitalist production. Competition between cigarette manufacturers led to the sales technique of inserting collectible cards in cigarette packs. In the 1930s one could collect several sets of reproductions of black-and-white photographs of dancers on cards, featuring Josephine Baker, Isadora Duncan, German expressionist dancers like Mary Wigman, and the stars of the Russian Ballet. The Garbaty company, for example, distributed 250 cards of several famous dancers in the Gold Saba cigarette boxes of the 1930s. In 1933 the Dresden cigarette factory Eckstein-Halpaus inserted 320 cards with photographs of dancers in boxes of the Eckstein nr. 5 cigarettes, including a Mary Wigman series. The cigarette manufacturers obviously took advantage of “the emphasis on visual communication that pervaded modern urban life” and used the photograph “as a competitive marketing device” (Giles 2000, 452).

Collecting cigarette or tobacco cards was very fashionable. Geoffrey J. Giles pointed out how the extensively issued tobacco cards were designed to appeal to the whole family nucleus, stimulating a particular mode of collecting. The so-called cigarette cards could be treasured in a *Sammelalbum* (a collection album). The Garbaty album *Berühmte Tänzerinnen* (Famous Female Dancers), for example, contains luxurious paper with preparatory text and primary sheets with slots and captions for the 250 cards. A similar album is *Der Künstlerische Tanz* (The Artistic Dance), issued by Eckstein-Halpaus. In this way, the photographs became collector’s items and generated a particular mode of collecting that stimulated a desire for completeness rather than for historical value. The value attached to the photograph resides in its function as fetish and its proclaimed rarity. Walter Benjamin has aptly observed how caring about the past took on a distinctively new form from the nineteenth century onwards. In *The Arcades Project* he describes the systematic collecting of beautiful curios as a bourgeois coziness, celebrating fashion, security, and comfort. The bourgeoisie valued the collected objects for their relation to other elements in a series. The collection proceeds by enclosing a particular item “within a magic circle, where, as a lost shudder runs through it (the shudder of being acquired), it turns to stone,” says Benjamin. “Everything remembered, everything thought, everything conscious becomes socle, frame, pedestal, seal of his possession” (1999, 205).

The collectible cigarette cards have the same glorifying effect on remembering dance(rs). The commentary on each photograph, printed on the back of each card, is celebratory and offers a poignant insight into the iconic values being communicated. Adelheid Seek, featured on number 81 of the Garbaty tobacco card series, for example, “is a marvellous slim girl who dances in plenty of revues and cabarets, both as a choral and a solo dancer” (my translation). Tobacco card dancer number 90, Olga Desmond, was “believed in 1910 to be able to attract new friends to the art of dance by wearing as little attire as possible” (my translation). With a close-up of Mary Wigman, praise came for “the pioneering leader of new German dance” (my translation).

It is obvious that the iconic values that are communicated by the tobacco cards have little to do with the awareness of modern dance movements but instead with stardom, female beauty, and physical appearances. Mary Wigman’s tobacco card close-up in fact resembles the glossy quality of film stars of the era like Ginger Rodgers and Marlene Dietrich, issued in packs of Kurmark brand cigarettes in 1934 and released in a set of 300 cards in the album *Garbaty Moderne Schönheitsgalerie* (Garbaty Modern Beauty Gallery). Wigman is portrayed in the same Hollywood style portrait lighting that was nearly universal for photographing female stars. The so-called Butterfly or Paramount lighting had a feathery effect and bestowed godlike qualities on facial features.¹ In Wigman’s portrait, it is as if the “master’s touch” of the Paramount photographer even erased the historic value of modern dance movements in favor of glamorous close-up devices for mass distribution. The icon Mary Wigman has been put in a frame, on a pedestal, to become the seal of the collector’s possession.

In his archival research preceding the reenactment of the nine short Wigman solos, Barba resisted the enchantment of the modern collector. Rather than glorifying and statically preserving or reconstructing the Mary Wigman idiom on the basis of a traditional notion of the archive, he does not conceal the historical, physical, and mental differences with his own corporeal archive. In this way, Barba prefigures a historical attitude that is reminiscent of Walter Benjamin's notion of the *Lumpensammler* or ragpicker. In *Ragpickers in a Postcommunist Age*, Frederik Le Roy observed how Benjamin's allegory of the ragpicker contains a challenging notion for the theater historian. Following *The Arcades Project*, the ragpicker prefers to show "the rags, the refuse" of history rather than the "valuables" of "monumental" historiography (Le Roy 2009). In approaching his body as a living archive, Barba subverts iconic clichés of the past in the present. In following a mode of collecting similar to that of the ragpicker, Barba moves beyond the consumed, flat image of the Wigman icon. He puts into question the proclaimed unity of the archival collection. Once the tobacco card collection is complete, it claims to provide a consistent overview of the main, monumental figures in a series. An archival collection similarly functions as the creator of historical order that forms the basis for tradition, continuity, and identity. Just like statues and national museums, institutional archives aim at sustaining a homogeneous and coherent cultural memory and national identity. Strolling the ruins of the history of modern dance, Barba avoids the narrative patterning of history and knowledge. He does not try to conceal death or ruination by merely romanticizing the era of modern dance but highlights how easily the formerly fashionable and glorious becomes antiquated, how easily the formerly comfortable (as in the representational codes previously discussed) becomes strange. That explains our ambivalent feelings as we watch his performance of the solos. When the lights are subdued in the auditorium, the two golden chandeliers outfitted with electric candles are reminiscent of the lighting facilities of the 1930s. This formerly fashionable and luxurious item appears to be antiquated and dwarfed in this well-equipped, highly sophisticated theater. Instead of trapping or enclosing us within a magical, glamorous circle, the chandeliers highlight the interpretative gap.

Photo 2. Mary Wigman as featured in the Garbaty Company album *Berühmte Tänzerinnen (Famous Female Dancers)*. Her tobacco card close-up resembles the glossy quality of film stars of the era (1930s).



Reenactment in Perpetual Modulation

Barba, however, does more than show how different the present is from the past. In aiming at an embodied reenactment in which the Wigman idiom dialogues with his body as a living archive, he also testifies to difference in a heterogeneous, creative sense. Barba does not attest to a clear-cut past, as evidence of "a" dance movement, "a" culture or "a" identity. The bourgeois desire for closed homogeneous systems, reflected in the pleasure of completeness in collecting a fixed set of tobacco cards, is also repudiated by the figuration of the reenactor as ragpicker, who assembles heterogeneous materials. Barba hence avoids the entrapment of the Wigman idiom within the magic and static circle of clichéd reproduction and representation. The molding principle of the iconic cliché is opened up and provides space for modulation in the Deleuzian sense of this term.

In *Difference and Repetition* Deleuze observed that perception, in the world

of representation, is reduced to the *principium comparationis*. It is characterized by “its inability to conceive of difference in itself” (2004, 174). Deleuze borrows André Bazin’s concept of “moulding” to denote the closed system of representation in photography: “Photography is a kind of ‘moulding,’” he says, “the mould organizes the internal forces of the thing in such a way that they reach a state of equilibrium at a certain instant” (Deleuze 2005b, 25). Modulation, on the other hand “does not stop when equilibrium is reached, and constantly modifies the mould, constitutes a variable, continuous, temporal mould” (Deleuze 2005b, 25).

Lepecki’s notion of the reenacting body as an endlessly transformative archive in fact echoes this notion of modulation. We might say that Fabian Barba’s embodied reenacting is in perpetual modulation; the Wigman idiom is modulated in a perpetually variable and continuous manner and hence clichéd reproduction is avoided. With Barba, the Wigman archive dialogues with the living archive of the performer’s body. Perception hence constantly shape-shifts between the Wigman idiom and the performer’s corporeal memory, further differentiating the binaries of male–female and Ecuadorean–German. Difference is not attained by multiplying representations and points of view. “Difference must be shown *differing*,” says Deleuze (2005b, 68). “Difference must become the element. . . it must . . . refer to other differences which never identify it but rather differentiate it” (2005b, 68). The mould of the iconic cliché has been transformed into perpetual modulation and creative thinking. Barba’s reenactment brings together things that are apparently very different and separates those that appear to be very close. Barba hence neither destroys differences nor valorizes these things but multiplies and disperses differences, in order to move toward a world where differences would not be synonymous with exclusion.

Note

1. Soft-focus lenses were combined with hard key light, fill light, and back light, and sometimes the negative was retouched and subjected to sanding with volcanic pumice to further soften the skin and hence the features of the face.

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