

Thinking Resistances. Current Perspectives
on Politics and Communities in the Arts. Volume I



DANCE, POLITICS & CO-COMMUNITY

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Dance, Politics & Co-Immunity

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Dance, Politics & Co-Immunity developed out of a symposium organized by the Master in Choreography and Performance at the Justus-Liebig-University Giessen, Germany, which was held with a joint symposium *Thinking—Resisting—Reading the Political* organized by the Graduate Center for the Study of Culture at the same university in 2010. Whereas the cultural studies symposium asked, “What specific perspectives and methodological consequences arise for the study of culture that are informed by recent deliberations on the relationship of the political and the aesthetic?” (2010), the dance symposium invited participants and contributors to the anthology “to think about the multiple connections between politics, community, dance, and globalization from the perspective of Dance and Theatre Studies, History, Philosophy, and Sociology” (13). As indicated by the title of the cultural studies symposium and some of the key speakers, including Jacques Rancière, Chantal Mouffe, and Judith Butler, the term political is not used as broadly as it might be used in U.S.-based dance studies discourse. Rather, the political is predominantly investigated by both symposia for its resistive potential and from a liberal or post-Marxist stance.

The volume provides an English-speaking readership with a strong sample of German and European-influenced approaches to dance studies (*Tanzwissenschaft*). Together with such publications as *New German Dance Studies* edited by Susan Manning and Lucia Ruprecht (2012), Ruprecht’s *Dances of the Self* (2006), Gabriele Brandstetter’s now-translated earlier work *Poetics of Dance: Body, Image, and Space in the Historical Avant-Gardes* (2015), and Brandstetter and Gabriele Klein’s *Dance [and] Theory* (2013), the anthology shows the development of the field and current debates on the function of dance in society. *Dance, Politics & Co-Immunity* is decisively theoretical and requires the reader to be already familiar with predominantly European theories on politics, society, theater, community, aesthetics, and labor.

Tanzwissenschaft in Germany—as in other national education structures—had to assert its place in academia, which it did mostly by replicating and engaging with discourses and methodologies in established disciplines such as philosophy, art history, literary studies, anthropology, sociology, and theater and music theory. With this, *Tanzwissenschaft* is seen as part of *Geisteswissenschaft*, which can be translated as science of the spirit or mind and which excludes the arts. Even though most *Tanzwissenschaft* programs in Germany now offer an engagement with the practice of choreographing and dancing, they are predominantly theoretical in their focus. German educational structures still differentiate between vocational training and higher education, where the latter is geared toward *Bildung*. *Bildung* is the self-reflective realization and unfolding of a citizen’s potential through education. *Tanzwissenschaft* in higher education is thus much more abstract and universalizing than applied and historical approaches in the U.S., where dance studies are most often taught as dance history in vocationally oriented college and university dance departments.

In her contribution to the anthology, Bojana Cvejic suggests that as a frame to better analyze so-called “conceptual dance,” one should “minimize dancing as physical in favor of mental labor, or thought” (143). The same could be said for some of the essays in the anthology, specifically the ones that rely a great deal on language and discourse analysis. The result is a conceptualization of dance and its politics that seems abstract and at times even universalizes some of the analytic stances and models proposed by the individual authors. Even though there are scholars

currently working at U.S. or Canadian institutions represented in the anthology, and some of the discussed choreographies are from outside Europe, the emphasis of the anthology is decisively European. Some of the contributors, among them Gabriele Klein, Randy Martin, Bojana Kunst, Ana Vujanovič, and the volume editors, raise the issue of Western privilege in theorizing. Others like Erin Manning and Brian Massumi, Gabriele Brandstetter, Mark Franko, and Ramsay Burt avoid the universal gesture through the historical or social specificity of their argument.

The anthology's clear introduction by the editors Gerald Siegmund and Stefan Hölscher starts with the statement that the "developments in globalized neo-liberal capitalism" of the twenty-first century's first decade not only changed labor and production and thus societies in a global context, but also impacted the way dance is produced and received (7). As a result, lingering modernist assumptions about the autonomy of art and artistic freedom from the social are no longer valid. Even more so, the two authors suggest that dance, with its reliance on individual bodies and its concerns regarding the distribution of bodies in space, has become a model for—or, as I read it, even perpetuates—"neo-liberal dispositifs of power," which assert global mobility and access for a few and keep the majority of the world out and immobile (7–8). They then ask "[g]iven these circumstances, how can we think about the relation between dance and politics today without repeating neo-liberal demands and constraints?" (8). Siegmund and Hölscher see the purpose of the anthology as reflecting on "how dance, both in its modernist and in its contemporary manifestations, is intricately linked to conceptualizations of the political." And they immediately clarify: "... in this context the term *policy* means the reproduction of hegemonic power relations within already existing institutional structures, politics refers to those practices which question the space of policy as such by inscribing into its surface that which has had no place before" (12). This distinction, which has more recently been prominent in the theories of Jacques Rancière (2006), limits the political to resistive motions. Community, the other important concept investigated in the anthology is defined as "a contested space of ... a dialogue between equals" (13).

Most of the sixteen essays in the volume work with and explore these definitions. Even though they are organized into five subcategories that look at the politics of enjoyment, sense, modernism, the social, and community, I suggest that readers break away from the existing order and start with the chapter by Ana Vujanovič titled "Notes on the Politicality of Contemporary Dance." In conjunction with the Introduction and the immediately following and quite valuable overview on theorizations of communities by Gabriele Klein, Vujanovič provides readers with an outline of "some epistemic and social frameworks within which we can speak of politics when we speak of contemporary performance and art in general." Vujanovič also discusses "the characteristic modalities of politicality" that she registers "on the actual international dance scene" (181). Vujanovič seems to have a more inclusive understanding of politics when she stresses "the necessity to think a broad and complex *grid of politicality* as an aspect that characterizes each and every performance—be it political or apolitical, resistant or complicit, transformative or servile—as a social event that is practiced in public" (181).

She demonstrates the development of an understanding of the relationship between art and politics beginning with Hanna Arendt's analysis of politics as a distinct praxis in modern Western capitalist societies. She moves on to Maurizio Lazzarato, Antonio Negri, and Paolo Virno's subsuming of the political into all aspects of immaterial labor in post-Fordist production, and ends with Rancière's concept of the potentiality of a politics of aesthetics. Vujanovič seems to agree with Rancière's differentiation between police and politics, the first affirming and supporting existing structures, whereas the second critically and temporarily intervenes (185). Yet she also asserts that contemporary art/dance becomes part of the political and thus "training grounds or battlegrounds for the political practices of Western societies" (185). This leads her to the pessimistic view that "dance practitioners, in fact, become complicit with neo-liberal ideology" (191). I don't really understand how those two assumptions are compatible, because they work with different definitions of politics—one restricted to a resistive motion, and the other to a much broader understanding that permits

support of the status quo. More importantly—and that is probably one of my main criticisms of this and other contributions in the volume—how are we able to distinguish so clearly between collaborative and resistive artistic practices or even more generally to understand that some dance is political and some is not?

For instance, one of the essays by Oliver Marchart lists different categories of political action in Hannah Arendt's work and then expands them with "minimal conditions" that allow him to evaluate any dance as political or not (46). Marchart created this system to work "against the current inflation of the qualifier 'political'" (52). Some of the analyzed choreographies or public interventions then remain in his evaluation only as artistic interventions, whereas others become political ones, albeit as in the provided example of *Public Movement's* folk dancing in the streets of Tel Aviv only because they foreshadowed subsequent public protests in the same locality. As fascinating and theoretically enlightening as this is, I find such evaluations somewhat privileged. As I have argued elsewhere, resistance and political intervention are not always visible from the outside and require a complex analysis (Giersdorf 2013). Most importantly they also require a clear positioning of the one who labels and evaluates, a labor that is not necessarily visible in Marchart's contribution and some of the other essays.

I am intrigued by the number of chapters by scholars from countries that used to constitute Yugoslavia. If I am not mistaken, essays by Saša Asenitič, Bojana Cvejič, Bojana Kunst, and Ana Vujanovič, make up one-quarter of the book. What is it about their educational and national histories that make them such dominant and vibrant voices/bodies at this conference and in the discourse on dance and politics? Bojana Kunst's essay not only situates her clearly and beautifully in relation to her theoretical apparatus, she also explains her expansion of her analysis of modernist and post-Fordist movement into everyday vocabulary. However, I was still waiting to see how her belief in the potential of dance to disrupt and to induce change might relate more directly to some of the other essays in the anthology.

There are many chapters worth mentioning, such as Erin Manning and Brian Massumi's stunning argument against normative structures of perception in their analysis of texts written by autistic people, or André Lepecki's suggestion of the creation of "an a-personal field of endless negotiations and transformations" through a reconceptualization of leading and following in dancing (37). I find this idea interesting because such a field would also challenge the often-assumed ephemerality of performance and dance, although I am sure Lepecki wouldn't agree, because he is a strong proponent of dance at a perpetual vanishing point. And this is precisely the value of this anthology: it made me rethink my own assumptions on dance and politics, and it forced me into a discourse with different approaches to the politics of dancing. And I sincerely hope the volume will challenge what Seth Williams has called the common perception of German *Tanzwissenschaft* in the U.S.: that "it will win few new converts and will frustrate those who fault writing of a highly theoretical bent for its supposed imprecision" (2015, 99). Because only by reaching across different national and methodological approaches to the study of dance will we be able to increase its importance for society.

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