Dancing Politics: Worldmaking in Dance and Choreography

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I.

Dance is a world in itself – this is a central figure of discourse since the beginning of the 20th century, i.e. the period in which modern industrial society was established.[1]

As a world of the body and the senses, of movement and feelings, as a world of metaphors, for which words fail us, dance in the modern age, according to the modern dance discourse, constitutes an alternate world, namely a world beyond language and rationality. In the 20th century, dance, regardless of what kind, whether artistic dance, popular dance, religious ritual or therapeutic setting, represented a contrast to rationality, mechanization, technology and geometry. It was seen as an alternative realm to industrial work (cf. Klein 1992). Dance in the modern age drew its aesthetic legitimacy and its social justification for existence from this pattern of discourse, which allotted dance the social position of 'Outsider' and defined it as the 'Other'. Dance was considered an expression of feelings and understood as honest, authentic, organic or holistic: and this pattern of discourse formed the basis for asserting its subversive power and socio-critical and emancipatory potential, from which dance has derived and still derives its avant-garde claims as well as its educational mandate.

1 The text is a revised version of the opening lecture held at the Dance Congress Germany by the author on November 6, 2009 at the International Cultural Factory Kampnagel in Hamburg, Germany.

However, this self-perception of dance has met with little response from the political field. Quite the contrary: dance was – and this is still the case with many politicians – and is considered non-political. Conservatives have appreciated this fact, as for example, the Bavarian state parliamentarian, who justified the lifting of a war-time ban on dancing in the period of the 'Red Revolution' in Munich in November 1918 with the words: "People should dance rather than demonstrate." (Eichstedt/Polster 1985: 44) The leftist wing, on the other hand, has bemoaned mindless dancing: Theodor W. Adorno, for example, believed himself to behold "the coordinated battalions of mechanical collectivity" (Adorno 1941: 312) in the dance craze. The student movement as well sought to stir up society and set new social structures in motion, but this largely remained a metaphor. Ultimately, it meant that people should take to the streets, instead of dancing their heart out, mindlessly and half-naked, caught up in the simultaneously occurring boisterous disco trend of the 1970s – or later in the 1990s, the techno craze. To the same effect as Adorno, the social-democratic oriented German daily newspaper *Frankfurter Rundschau* described the discos in the 1970s as "uniform centers of enforced conformity" and after the Berlin Love Parade in 1996, the liberal German weekly newspaper *Die Zeit* wrote:

"We see hundreds of thousands of people semi-naked, laughing, while coercing their bodies to produce seemingly epileptic movements ('dancing'). Is this a mass of invalids meeting in the city for a demonstration of happy madness? The answer is short and sweet: yes." (Klein 1999: 18)

II.

In the 1960s, the pattern of discourse that assumed dance and politics to be opposites began to be challenged parallel to the social transformations and political movements of the age. This occurred on two levels: on the level of general developments in society and on the level of forms of thought.

The rapid social, political and economic changes since the 1960s produced a society, which today has been diagnosed and labeled as the media society, information society or knowledge society, as globalized, post-colonial or neoliberal. In this new world, societal and political contexts have themselves also changed; they have liquefied, their boundaries dissolved. As Richard Sennett vividly demonstrates in his book *Flesh and Stone* (cf. Sennett 1994), the metaphor of 'flow' first manifested itself in the end of the 19th century in, what were at that time, new concepts of the modern and mobile city, the flow of traffic

and arterial roads. It also manifested itself in concepts of physiology, such as blood circulation and neural pathways. In the 20th century, this found its expression in a specific understanding of the organization of the body, e.g. as an energetic body and society or as an (auto)mobile society. Movement, dynamics, flow – these terms form the kinetic basis of the modern age. It has often been neglected in theories of modernity, but Randy Martin and André Lepecki have shown that this is extremely important for the discussion of dance and politics (cf. Lepecki 2006; Martin 1998). The modern topos of endless movement marks the topographic fantasy and the colonial principle of modernity: the positing of movement as an ontological principle and its abstraction from specific cultures, bodies and lifestyles. The modern fantasy of endless movement also carries within it the notion of a colonialization of space, of subjects and bodies. The fact that this movement may not be interrupted by catastrophes, suffering and personal tragedy, that these should be considered natural catastrophes and fate, also points to the "kinetic reality of the modern age as mobilization" (Sloterdijk 1989: 27) as Peter Sloterdjik calls it. From this perspective, suffering, death and lamentation, the central topics of German Expressionist Dance in the 1920s, can be interpreted as resistance, as exposing the subsurface history of modernity.

With the advent of the globalized society, this basic kinetic principle of modernity was staged as a "spectacle of innocence" (cf. Lepecki 2006): the free movement of data-streams, the unlimited flow of capital, new waves of migration, the fall of political walls and symbolic borders permitted the emergence of a philosophical idea of openness. With it the spotlight of aesthetic discourse fell on contingency, a term that in sociology addresses the principle openness of possible life forms, and on potentiality, a concept in philosophy intended to overcome the dualism of possibility and reality. However, from a pragmatic point of view, it was the promising set phrase 'everything is possible', which became the ideology of a society that had lost its political perspective on the future and had pilloried the fundamental possibility of a political utopia with the fall of the Berlin wall and the disbanding of confrontational social systems. On the other hand, this society also began to suffer amnesia and a loss of history as part of its growing medialization.

The concept of limitless opportunities in the here and now became more than just the motto of a neo-liberal, so-called free world market, with the devastating consequences of its uncontrolled financial markets. It also transformed into the paradigm of a governmental politics of self-sufficiency that – whether in healthcare, education or pension systems, even in public funding for the arts – increasingly shifted responsibility onto the individual and made self care and self-formation of one's own optionalized body its credo.

The so-called "liberation of people from traditional obligations" (cf. Beck 1992), sociology's unpleasant description of this process since the 1980s, also provoked the fiction of the limitless possibilities available to organize the conditions of one's own life. The figure of the 'global player' appeared as a fictional role model on the horizon of a society based on the imaginary circulation of money. Behind this figure lies a subject type, which is 'kinetic', following an endless, self-motivated desire for unlimited movement. It is a type of subject that colonizes, because in subtle ways, it is defined as male, heterosexual and white.

This type of subject is not just a type of global economic activity. Even a group quite important to the globalized economy, the so-called creative class, represent distinct areas of competence that matter to the *modus operandi* of the 'global player' – creativity, virtuosity and intellectualism (cf. Virno 2004). Artists are its main representatives – albeit under precarious living conditions and the 'new poverty'. And so the new societal model of the flexible, geographically unattached and vagabond kinetic self-recursive subject has found its prototype in the 'freelance dancer'. The dancer: unattached, nomadic, an eternal migrant passing by.

In this historic moment, dance steps forth from its long confinement in the shadows and becomes the main focus of societal, philosophical and educational interest. It has become a symbol of a globalized and medialized society, which has promoted the ephemeral, fluid, momentary and placeless as its guiding metaphor. But the ephemeral, which was until recently always a characteristic feature of dance as an alternative corporeal world that made it distinguishable from a modern society that valued calculated reason, has become a fundamental societal problem in a globalized society. This is because ephemerality and liquidity here not only mean boundless movement and infinite possibilities, but also a fundamental change in the topology of social perception: social security, the welfare state, sedentism, social integration and a mutual sense of responsibility have disappeared in favor of a lack of obligations, loss of emotional ties, nomadic lifestyles and social disintegration. How can dance – given this social topos of 'ephemerality' – be critical and political?

III.

At the same time as these societal changes are hollowing out the basis of the welfare state (and its grande dames – social democracy and the trade union movement – along with it) and the so-called creative class is appointed a pioneering

role in future society after the end of the welfare state, the foundations of modern thinking are also radically being called into question: born forward by French philosophy, post-structuralism has attacked the binary logic of modern thought in particular. The image, language, writing and art have become the focus of many philosophical discussions attempting to define one or several of these semantic systems as a binding framework for humanity's understanding of reality or rather as the foundation for "ways of worldmaking" (cf. Goodman 1978) in Western culture – as Nelson Goodman would formulate it.

Largely unnoticed by philosophy and aesthetic theory, post-structuralist thought left its traces in the aesthetic practice of contemporary dance. The dancer's own medium, the body, was intensely scrutinized, new movement techniques invented, expanded or modified. Body techniques such as Alexander Technique or BMC, movement techniques such as contact improvisation and various Asian martial arts were mixed with new (post)modern dance techniques (e.g. Cunningham, Limón) and the deconstruction of classical vocabulary (e.g. by Forsythe) broadened not only the technical basics of dance, but also its aesthetic approach. *Tanztheater* ('dance theater') used everyday gestures to bridge the realms of art and everyday life. The narrative disappeared in favor of fragmented montage-like choreography: the linearity of narration literally broke apart into 'dance pieces'. Contemporary dance questioned and defeated existing concepts concerning the nature of movement in breaks, stills, stumbles and falls. Not movement as flow, but interruption, not presence (as in the omnipresent media landscape), but rather absence (cf. Siegmund 2006) now became the focus of attention. Choreography increasingly became a matter of dramaturgy; whereas the once close link between dance and choreography gradually loosened. Choreography as an arrangement of movement, as work and as notation was in itself challenged and the previous dualisms of composition and improvisation, work and process were called into question. This development occurred analog to the rise of various new paradigms in the cultural sciences: whereas, in the 'linguistic turn', dance was considered text and choreography an order of language, after the 'performative turn' and its critique of representation, concepts such as liveness, presence/absence, instantaneousness, authenticity, identity or authorship took center stage in contemporary choreography. Whether in philosophical-theoretical references or in forms of aesthetic criticism or even in the presentation of illness, marginalization or ugliness, all these pieces addressed the un-portrayable, non-treatable, invisible in the portrayal of physical existence, physical 'truth' and physical difference.

Post-structuralist thinking did not only influence dance and choreographic practice. Although only rarely applied to dance, it also instituted a reversal in the

discourse surrounding the art of dance in modernity by calling into question Adorno's dictum of the autonomy of art – in part underpinned by a glorification of carnival or the search for hybrid forms of art and everyday life, art and pop – and furthermore challenging the respective 'specificity' of the arts, but also by gradually relieving dance of avant-garde aspirations. Thanks to post-structural thought, a paradox was thus revealed in the relationship between politics and dance, which is typical for modernity making it difficult for some to provide answers to questions concerning the political dimensions of dance and for others making these questions itself seem redundant. In other cases still, this paradox leads to the opinion that an affinity of dance and politics may even be damaging for dance itself. So what really constitutes this paradox?

IV.

According to the considerations of French philosopher Jacques Rancière (cf. Rancière 2006), it is a paradox that is deeply ingrained in the modern age: on the one hand, there is the emphasis on the freedom and autonomy of art, as well as the specific natures of the individual arts (in the case of dance as a physical art, transient art, etc.) and on the other, the aspiration of the avant-garde to play its part in the fulfillment of the principles of modernity.

This paradox is based on two antagonistic positions. First, we have a position that postulates the autonomy of dance and identifies it as pure art. According to this position, dance has special powers, because it produces poetry via abstract language liberated from the everyday functions of the body. Accordingly, dance in the modern age is comparable to pure movement, which is free from any analogy to language, as well as from any form of representation. Its relationship with the societal modern age is detached and analogical. Depending on the respective historic tide of events, this dance aesthetic is either considered sober and free of magic or radical and revolutionary. A prominent example of this dance aesthetic is the work of Merce Cunningham.

The other position is one that defines dance as a way of life and sees its task as that of fulfilling the claims of modernity to equality, self-fulfillment and emancipation. This position can be traced back e.g. to Friedrich Schiller's concept of the "aesthetic education of man". It can be found in the philosophy behind expressionist dance, in the importance that was ascribed to dance theatre in the past and the importance that is ascribed to dance today in current debates about cultural education. Dance is therein a specific physical-sensual way of accessing worlds and by providing people with this specific form of 'aesthetic

education', they are given the chance to live in a free and equal political community based on self-development. The societal modern age is thus faced with the challenge to implement the 'anthropogeny of humanity' in and through sensual forms and practices. Art – and especially dance as a corporeal art – is considered societal avant-garde and the ideal media capable of fulfilling this task.

Both positions provoke various aesthetic paradigms. The first position, which maintains the relative autonomy of dance and sees the revolutionary and emancipatory potential of dance in precisely this aspect, avoids associating dance with societal work, improving the world or the reintegration of alienated life. Adorno succintly formulated the paradox inherent in this position: "Insofar as a social function may be predicated of works of art, it is the function of having no function." (Adorno 1997: 336)

The other position, which seeks to bridge dance and life, inevitably has to depart from the concept of aesthetic experience – generally defined as a sensual experience distinct from everyday experience – in order to overcome the presumed difference between art and life. Instead its aim is to create forms of aesthetic experience everywhere: in art and politics, in sports and commerce, in work and leisure. It defines dance not as an alternative world, but as a meta-world that strives to do what politics – here meaning political institutional work – claims to do, but only indirectly realizes through laws and regulations, if at all: to change specific lifestyles. The paradox of this position consists in the fact that it ultimately makes art superfluous, namely when art merges with politics. How can this paradox of dance and politics as inscribed in modernity be resolved?

V.

One line of thought is not to understand dance and politics as two separate worlds, as autopoetic systems with their own rules, norms and values, but, in keeping with the words of philosopher Jacques Rancière, to see them as two forms of "dividing the sensual". Accordingly, dance and politics are interwoven strategies of a "politics of the kinaesthetic" and a "kinaesthetic policy". Politics is thus less to be understood as a form of power or institutional strategy and dance not as a field subsidized by politics or as a purely aesthetic practice. Instead, the political is here formulated normatively and focuses on only one aspect: political activity, which according to Rancière is "whatever shifts a body from the place assigned to it or changes a place's destination. It makes visible what had no business being seen, and makes heard a discourse where once there was only

place for noise; it makes understood as discourse what was only heard as noise." (Rancière 1991: 30)

Analog to linking the concept of the political to specific practices, aesthetics is therefore not simply art theory and the aesthetic not just a form of perception. Instead, the aesthetic is inscribed in political practice – precisely because these practices with their norms, rules and habits already determine sensual perception by socially positioning people, allocating social and political space for them to maneuver in and thus framing social perception. Exactly therein also lies the political dimension of the physical-sensual, of movement perception, in other words, the dimension of "kinaesthetic politics": a concept of political activity as the sensual practice of making cultural and social codes visible and shifting them – in such a way that they contradict the "police order" as Rancière calls it.

VI.

From this perspective, the relationship of dance and politics does not allow itself to be reduced to representative, interventionist or documentary aspects. In other words: the simple fact that there is and should be a lobby for dance, the fact that dance should become a fix element of cultural and educational policy and that dance must be documented better as knowledge culture, is self-evident. Intervention into the "police order" of the fabric of artistic, cultural and educational policy is an important and indispensable step.[2] However, political activity as a concrete-sensual practice, as a "politics of the aesthetic" is then only just beginning.

If cultural and educational politics are political intervention, then the "politics of the kinaesthetic" has consisted and consists of micro-politics in how "the practices and forms of the visibility of *dance* itself intervene in the division and rearrangement of the sensual" (Rancière 2006: 8).

2 On this level, *Tanzplan Deutschland* (Dance Plan Germany), an initiative of the German Federal Cultural Foundation, has attempted the exceptional, shown courage and achieved something extraordinary and unique. Tanzplan Deutschland provided the framework for the potentiality of political practice. It has changed the topology of how contemporary dance is perceived: Hamburg – with K3, the Centre for Choreography and improved support for contemporary dance from the cultural authorities and other institutions in Hamburg in cooperation with Performance Studies University of Hamburg – is a good example of this.

From this perspective dance is not political per se, because it is a physical-sensual medium. For the same reason, it is also not non-political per se. It is rather, as I argue, political when the aesthetic practice grates against the reigning order, norms, habits and conventions – and not only grates against them, but also changes them.

So-called conceptual dance, as it emerged in Europe in the 1990s, mainly sought these micropolitics within the artistic process – and here also saw itself as an experiment with the social. There are traditions underlying this work – in Germany, too; we need only to think back on Gerhard Bohner's attempts at collective work (in Darmstadt) at the end of the 1960s. Contrary to the theories of many recent academic dance publications, contemporary dance, as an artistic practice, did not simply become political in the 1990s by focusing on collectives, on collaborations, on networks. These forms were neither new nor are they 'a field of experimentation' with the social, a 'model' of a reality to come. They are social, but as such not political per se. In my understanding, they are political when they attack the societal division of the sensual, i.e. transform norms and conventions, namely those that are always also distinctive and which include and exclude. And they are political when they produce a critical difference to the "kinaesthetic reality of the modern age" (Sloterdijk 1989: 25), but this also occurs via a critical theory and practice of gender, of the body (the dancing body and body concepts), of class and of post-colonial politics. And finally, they are political when they exist not only as functional networks, but also develop a sense of community: a feeling that does not declare community to be the goal, but assumes it as a precondition for the practices themselves. Politics as a concrete sensuous activity requires the creation of collective identities – and therefore these cannot be created solely through transient and non-binding networks and politics, however important these may be for dance.

VII.

Consensus is a favorite catchword of present-day politicians on the left, as well as the right, or better said: all those coming from right or left, who want to occupy the centre. But politics, as political theorists from Carl Schmitt to Karl Marx, i.e. right as well as left, agree, is created out of difference. It emerges where sensual perception and experience rub up against the traditional order. Many social movements – women's lib, the peace movement, gay and black rights – have proved this in practice. Because the political activity of these social movements – and this, too, is little noted by political theory – were and are

above all grounded in corporeal practices. Activists chaining themselves to radioactive containers, African-American women remaining seated on a bus, homosexual couples kissing in public, but also the choreo(graphic) politics of demonstrations, sit-ins or smart mobs – these and many other examples in the recent history show that political practices can change the order and perception of these "police orders" when above all expressed in the form of corporeal activity. Dance can be a medium for training corporeal perception. But – as Randy Martin (cf. Martin 1998) has shown: Dance is much more. Dance is a key area of the political and by questioning central categories, such as rhythm, force, space, time, energy, dynamics and flow, it sheds light on the kinetic foundations of modern society.

Seen from this perspective, the customary separation of dance from other areas of society, but above all the demarcations within the dance field itself – for example between dance as art, dance studies and dance education – are irrelevant. The political dissent of dance does not consist of the fact that artists, politicians, academics or teachers are so terribly different as to misunderstand one another and to (have to) distance themselves or their thoughts from one another. Instead it always occurs where the concrete practice of dance is confronted with an order that wishes to codify. This is an experience equally shared by academics, dance teachers and choreographers – although in different cultures, as well as in different ways in the context of hegemonic cultural policy.

To conclude: dance as politics is dissent, understood in the ancient Greek sense as *agon*, as an intellectual and sensual competition over the specific sensual conditions and possibilities of dance in the future.

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