

# Protocols of Encounter: On Dance Dramaturgy

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“It’s amazing. We all came together at the same time. Because we are all here ... and you’re all here ... and so we’re all here together”, Claire Marshall puts it in a nutshell in *The Thrill Of It All* by Forced Entertainment.<sup>1</sup>

This shared ‘being-in-time’ and the instantaneousness and immediacy of influences and products, which reveal themselves in it, seems to me one of the fundamental parameters for thinking about dramaturgy in the context of current choreographic work.

Over the last few years, a number of performances, projects and their medial and theoretical extensions have formulated an new understanding of choreography that exceeds the organization of movement in time and space: Mette Ingvartsen’s performance *Evaporated Landscapes* can be read as a radical concept of disembodiment, in which neither the choreographer nor other performers set foot on stage, and yet the body is nevertheless, precisely because of its absence, negotiated between the poles of materiality and imagination and constantly created anew in a specific scenario, a machinery of lights, sound, soap bubbles, fog and dry ice. Daniel Aschwanden und Peter Stamer’s piece *The Path of Money*, for which they followed the journey of a banknote or rather of its owners during a trip to China, can be interpreted as a choreographic involvement with individual agents of an economy that has escalated into utter confusion. The sound-text performances of Jürgen Berlakovich are experimental set-ups, which

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1 Forced Entertainment: *The Thrill Of It All*, theater performance, premiere on May 7, 2010 at Kaaithheater, Brussels.

situate the place of choreography in the materiality of language, in what evades speech and speech movements, intention and perception.<sup>2</sup>

Cited here as example and as representative of others, these artists explore in their work the choreographic in other forms or media and in other disciplines, in thinking and writing – thus opening it up to the social and political. Instead of distancing dance from other discursive and artistic practices, this perspective integrates the overflowing and breaking down of barriers by the art form itself.<sup>3</sup> This broadening of the term is not only significant for the practice of those artists, who have already long situated themselves between formats and forms of expression and allowed definitional dividing lines such as the differentiation of ‘dance’ and ‘performance’ to become obsolete. It also once more reveals the field of choreography as a historically grown medial hybrid, in mutual manifold exchange with the traditional genres of music, theater, painting or sculpture and moving back and forth between everyday actions and organization, documentation and art work, live event and institutional representation.

At the same time, this version of the choreographic can be read as a conceptual approach and a self-manifesting practice closely connected to various movements of disintegration and interaction, which have shaped the order of the world and its mental environment over the last decades in the form of profound upheavals. Lebanese author Amin Maalouf speaks of a “*dérèglement du monde*”; an irregularity and absence of rules, which has seized various areas of life individually, but also as a whole: intellectual life, as well as the financial markets, climate development, as well as geopolitical situations and questions of ethics (cf. Maalouf 2009: 11). This environment is marked by an immediacy and acceleration of history, whose events are taking place (in their medialized and fragmented form) before the eyes of the whole of mankind and in real-time, and the simultaneous relativity of individual action, which is shaped by local resour-

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2 Cf. Mette Ingvartsen: *Evaporated Landscapes* (2009), Daniel Aschwanden and Peter Stamer: *The Path of Money* (2009) and Jürgen Berlakovich: *Sound-Sleeper* (2010).

3 “I believe the worst habit in dance at the moment is to insist on the autonomy of dance as an independent art form or language. I believe that this differentiation could become a disadvantage for dance. While choreographers already take working across genre boundaries with a broadened concept of dance for granted, the battle for the recognition of dance as such is still being fought on other fronts. Either, because we presenters think that our audience needs such thinking in pigeonholes or because funding programs and cultural politics still follow a logic that presupposes separated disciplines,” said curator Pirkko Husemann in an analysis of the situation in contemporary dance (Husemann/Wagner 2011: n.p.).

ces and structures. It confronts us with the challenge of having to handle disturbing and disorienting experiences (cf. Maalouf 2009: 89), as well as the ‘Unknown’. A situation of concurrent worlds, whose connections and correlations, resonances and counterpoints, paradoxes and ambivalences must continuously be integrated into one’s life and actions.

“Parce qu’il ne s’agit pas seulement de mettre en place un nouveau mode de fonctionnement économique et financier, un nouveau système de relations internationales, ni seulement de corriger quelques dérèglements manifestes. Il s’agit aussi de concevoir sans délai, et d’installer dans les esprits, une tout autre vision de la politique, de l’économie, du travail, de la consommation, de la science, de la technologie, du progrès, de l’identité, de la culture, de la religion, de l’Histoire; une vision enfin adulte de ce que nous sommes, de ce que sont les autres, et du sort de la planète qui nous est commune.” (Maalouf 2009: 314)

“Shouldn’t art, as the traditional authority for the representation of time and as presentation of an era logically be at the center of the crisis?” asks Frédéric Pouillaude (Pouillaude 2009: 354) and points out the extent to which the decomposition of overarching categories of significance and the associated shift from ideological to identity debates (cf. Maalouf 2009: 23) has also affected the cultural realm and artistic production and creation. With this in mind, a reflection of the status of the choreographic and the performative and their processes of worldmaking seems more relevant today than ever before, especially against the backdrop of the last decade, characterized by a revival of performance art and its extensive museification and historicization. This development has led to a reevaluation of photographic, film and written documentation and in recent years of strategies of reenactment. Performances are meanwhile firmly established as equal parts of exhibitions and art fairs, dance festivals and institutional theater programming – and choose this process of institutionalization itself as starting point for their research.<sup>4</sup>

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4 The Burgtheater Wien has produced – just to name some exemplary situations – the independent New York theater group Nature Theatre of Oklahoma with *Life and Times. Episode I + II* 2009 and 2010 under participation of their own ensemble; performance groups such as Rimini Protokoll or Needcompany are also a regular part of performance season of municipal stages; performative pieces are an integral part of collections, exhibitions, and retrospectives in international art museums such as e.g. *Marina Abramovic: The Artist is Present* at the MoMA (New York 2010), *Move: Choreographing You* at the Southbank Centre/Hayward Gallery (London 2010/2011)

## MOMENTS OF TRANSITION

Art often takes place in twilight zones, between attempts at framing disciplines, legal definitions of public and private, personal precarity and creative waste. In the flickering and static of the moments of interference generated in these processes, in their lapses and their silence, the human body reveals itself as a place of conflict – it is precisely these moments of exposing-oneself, which artists work on and with. In the process, they do not remain constrained to the level of communication with others on stage or exchange with the audience. Instead, they reject in their artistic approaches the concept of the body as a passive refuge of subjectivity and utilize their bodies as material to participate in the discussion on the social re-negotiation of the conditions and conditionality of human behavior and actions. As directly self-manifesting action rather than agents of communication, they are resistance and simultaneously a venture into defining that what is missing in life today, what is censored, the existing or strived towards premises of life. In these moments, a gulf opens up between the vulnerability and the cultural, economic, ethical or also physical restrictions of the body as carrier of control mechanisms and standardization, of dreams and desires; they overlap and trace the quiet, more brittle borderlines of community beyond the accredited selectivity of our life together. It is precisely in the heterogeneity of its aesthetic forms that performance art can formulate its potential to liberate itself from the constrictions of its traditions and update its topics and motifs in alternate spaces, which are always also social spaces. The in-between spaces and their call for social responsibility open up the body in the constitution of presence not only in regard to the past, but also towards the future. Like a texture, stretched between the regulative and the permeable, art and artists are now more than ever presented with the challenge of affectively dealing with and reacting to the described overall processes of change, of organizing the coexistence of multiple and heterogeneous voices and influences and integrating the ‘Outer’, the ‘Other’, the ‘Unknown’ as possibilities in their work and of finding a place for the dancing body in this shifting environment. In doing so, the bodies present themselves as contemporaries that emphasize their own involvement. They cannot be separated from the life, culture, society that they are constantly reflecting and examining; they are the artistic and personal

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or the presentation of the *Collection in Motion* at the Museum of Contemporary Art in Zagreb. Choreographers such as Krđot Juurak (i.e. *Autodomestication*, 2009) or Petra Zanki and Tea Tupajić (*The Curators’ Piece*, ongoing) directly refer to the relationship of markets, institutions and artistic production in their work.

negotiations of self-made and foreign experiences. Beyond daydreams and promises, they facilitate encounters in the speechlessness of a communication society that is continuously in the process of differentiation. These bodies make meetings possible that do not exclude emotions, limitations and injuries, but instead integrate the experience of instability and vulnerability and are thus more than a stylization of the everyday. Without negating the experiences of the past or the temptations of the present, they integrate something upcoming in their perspectives.

I am therefore less interested in the shimmering and yet substantially often meaningless phenomenon of the contemporary (and in the knowledge that, strictly speaking, dance only exists as contemporary, cf. Pouillaude 2009), than in moments of transition, in which the paradoxes and inner contradictions of art become visible. For the art of dance and performance, this raises the question of fundamental historical significance for the art form concerning its potential for transcending boundaries: not as a one-dimensional path from the institution into social reality, but as a steady interplay between formalization and its socio-political reappraisal, between everyday experience and aesthetic appearance, between affective immediacy and its distancing discourse.<sup>5</sup> Because choreographic work, for example, functions both as an installation as well as live performance and the formats of presentation and reception mutually influence each other, artists pursue these moments of transition in their artistic research and production and in doing so, also explore implicit ideas of the mobile and mobilization<sup>6</sup> (cf. Noeth 2010). These discursive as well as artistic-practical movements also form the basis for a much-needed new definition of the place of dramaturgy in the context of choreographic-performative processes.

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- 5 “I believe that the feelings produced by books are equal to the ideas that they generate. Actually, I don’t know how to distinguish between feelings and thoughts. They are made of the same substance”, writes Gregg Bordowitz. In the performance-opera *The History of Sexuality Volume One by Michel Foucault: An Opera, 2010* (Premiere October 1, 2010, Tanzquartier Wien), he examined with Paul Chan the epochal theory of Michel Foucault and its inquiry into the mechanisms of ideas and their habitualization, embodiment and transformation into discourse.
- 6 The moment of transition described here was the subject of the coordinated performance and exhibition project *Push and Pull* by Tanzquartier Wien and MUMOK (October 2010), in collaboration with TATE Modern, London, curated by Barbara Clausen, Achim Hochdörfer, Walter Heun and Sandra Noeth.

## WE ALWAYS FALL IN LOVE WITH WORLDS ...

Over the last few years, various events and publications have dealt with the topic of dramaturgy in dance.<sup>7</sup> We are faced with the need to reexamine a practice that originally developed out of theater and drama. In this tradition, dramaturgy functions as a place in which to structure and organize physical as well as intellectual movements in a largely closed, autopoietic construct that constitutes itself in relationship to elements such as time, space, rhythm, movement vocabulary and phrasing, figures and narration or the relationship of music and movement. As an instrument of contextualization and framing, it is usually related to a specific role in the working process designated as a putative 'first viewer' or 'objective observer'. This idea of the dramaturgical as separate from choreographic and discursive processes has been toppled not least of all by a confident and self-reflexive community of dance and performance artists. Both in reaction to and as a consequence of a world 'in search of', they have created room for collaboration in self-organized artistic processes of research and exchange and appropriated spaces that have emerged between definition of roles, division of labor and economic processes of distribution (cf. Ruhsam 2010). I would like to mention as an example the Zagreb based artist collective BADco., who constantly challenge and redefine the function and responsibilities of their members depending on the ongoing projects and issues (cf. BADco.hr); or the method of re-formulation, which the artistwin deufert+plischke use to provide space for different artistic and discursive perspectives and strategies in the development of their work in form of various differentiated principles of imparting material and writing (cf. Deufert/Noeth/Plischke 2009).

As a consequence, even methodological considerations concerning the dramaturgical require adequate further development, which takes into account new perspectives: how can this 'being-with-an-Other' be organized, the relationship to the foreign, the 'Outside' be defined in the artistic process, how can the unexpected, mistakes, dilettantism, or to formulate it more generally, that which evades control, attention, the institution, be grasped as a specific form of knowledge? And how can dance, the body be defined as a space for negotiation

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7 Cf. i.e. *Performance Research: On Dramaturgy*, Volume 4, Number 3, September 2009 or *Maska: The Dramaturgy of Dance* Number 66-67, 2001. See also the theoretical-artistic conferences Europäische Dramaturgie im 21. Jahrhundert (European Dramaturgy in the 21st Century), 26.-30.09.2007 in Frankfurt am Main or the SDHS Conference Dance Dramaturgy, 23.-26.06.2011 in Toronto.

and as potential<sup>8</sup>, which opens itself to the upcoming (cf. Pouillaude 2009: 23)? In this interaction, this texture of mutual, almost non-identifiable, because simultaneous influences, and traces and logics, between crisscrossing, overlapping, opposing and transforming concepts, ideas and areas of research, it seems helpful to think about dramaturgy not primarily as a form-giving instrument, but rather as a shared practice of encounter. The question of how community is created and whether we can still today say ‘we’ alongside the ‘I’ (cf. Peeters 2007) is, from this perspective, one of the fundamental questions of dramaturgy; the measuring of the distance to each respective ‘Other’, which does not remain limited to the relationship of actors and audience and the investigation of the protocol of encounters in which artistic, discursive, social worlds are created, according to their central functions. It is about the way that simultaneity is handled e.g. the simultaneity of corporeal, political, ethical and other movements, which develop and negotiate narratives and metaphors of how community is created, how we think about affiliation and preservation, about the old and the new, about classification and availability, about hospitality and territory. Performance art and the parties involved create resonance chambers that are influenced, structured and impregnated by developments. In this regard, they contain and produce complexities and relationships to history, memory, society on various levels and in different ways – in relation to our bodies, our movements and language. Dramaturgy is exactly the place within a choreographic process that is dedicated to this very nexus of things.

## DRAMATURGY: ORGANIZING COEXISTENCE

In the course of the described broadening of the definition of choreography, dramaturgy has increasingly given less priority to questions of structure, form or aesthetic. It means more than just binding together the separate elements. And its primary goal cannot be to achieve consensus. Instead it is more about tracing the balance and equilibrium of the individual elements (body, movements, lights, sound, space, etc.), the responsibility of all parties involved, the shifts and changes created in their relationships. Accordingly there is the attempt to think about choreography not necessarily as the creation of a repertory in the sense of a fixed movement or a structured sequence of movements, but as the unknown, the vague, the not-yet-attained, misunderstandings, the monstrosity of all artistic

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8 Cf. Alain Badiou: “La danse n’est pas un art parce qu’elle est le signe de la possibilité de l’art, telle qu’inscrite au corps” (as cited in Pouillaude 2009: 22).

work, the simultaneity of creating and losing common ground, integrating an shared frame of reference.

In the weaving of the dramaturgical protocol, the focus lies not on the identification of authorship, chronologies or a succession of scenes, images, phrases and ideas, not on the creation of an imitable scheme or the production of a certain form; it is also not primarily about ‘right’ or ‘wrong’ and the prevention of mistakes in the process of work and representation. On the contrary, in each process the question arises anew, how the different formative elements are to be handled. Even if they repeat themselves in the artistic process and as a result imply the possibility of defining an identifiable and repeatable corpus, they do not necessarily also permit the definition of more fundamentally valid categories or concepts: they take place in never-ending steps of formulating and reformulating language and movement and generating a choreography of ideas that are the product of being together. In a large number of contemporary artistic productions, form, contents and idea of movement are interconnected, as are likewise various working phases and the tasks involved. The intertwining and the combinatory nature of research, conception, training, production and dissemination in a performance not only has an effect on the shifting positions and demands that artists themselves have to manage, but also reduce the need for a distinction of choreographic discourse from choreographic practice. A dramaturge’s material is hence unstable, because he or she is constantly redefining his or her point of departure anew. And it is precisely this moment of insecurity, which sets the body, the voices in motion over and over again. Of course, this is not about formulating a hasty metaphor or images, no false promises of flexibility and hybridity. Instead, I seek to define a dramaturgical mode of thought, which does not focus on efficiency, imitation or well-conducted research. A dramaturgy without a fixed a priori, composed of observations in a constantly transforming texture, within and out of which specifications and decisions must be made; a dramaturgy in which failure is an immanent component and which prevents hasty indulgence in one’s own assumptions, preferences and aversions.

To work and think dramaturgically thus covers more than the job description of a single person. It means opening up a divided, usually temporary space of negotiation and the creation and reflection of the evolving act of tracking the diverse traces of what is emerging. It does not mean not making decisions. It is much rather about the shouldering of responsibility with respect to the politics of decision-making. This study affects not only formal definitions and instructions on the level of movement creation, but also questions of proximity and distance, of recognition and responsibility and continues the gesture of inscribing the

social. This concept of dramaturgy maintains a strong relationship to the outside. More than the fixing of movement or the development of a specific aesthetic, dramaturgy writes a protocol of encounters, which develop in the shared period of time, in the contributed vocabulary of the situation. Dramaturgy means thinking about these traces of delegating and sharing, about how information is generated, produced, communicated, rejected, reapplied and finally brought onto the stage – in this respect, it is not about communication and not about the representation of a prefabricated status, but about the contemplation of strategies and processes of community and participation.

Dramaturgy is concerned with the emerging and the moment of emergence, with the fluctuation and not the cementing of positions and perspectives, with the clarification of intentions and the formulation of questions and also means to draw closer to each other in this process and in terms of an emancipated friendship, to become vulnerable, but also tangible. Dramaturgy enters another, shared body, organizes processes between intentionality and non-intentionality, between contradicting movements, bodies and relationships. The associated processes and changes of perspective are thus still connected to observation, even when they abandon the position of an accredited ‘objective’ observer. We are looking here at a practical concept of responsibility for one’s own work, but also for the interaction of all participating elements and the temporary community – for a protocol of human and artistic encounters. The dramaturgical accordingly concerns all areas of artistic work and is not located in an outside sphere, mainly occupied with creating contexts and applying knowledge (cf. Peeters 2007).

The relationship between dramaturgy and choreography is friendly one. Dramaturgy is not aimed at suppressing choreography or forcing it into a specific dance-technical or aesthetic or virtuous form. As a consequence, dramaturgy does not “belong” to anyone. It is a monster – phantasmal, an analysis that in its survey of the conditions and conditionality of encounters accepts and addresses the instability and vulnerability of life as given. As an instrument of perspective, the focus lies not on a specific form, but on the question how decisions are felled, how communication is created, as well as the related experiences of manipulation and imitation, of representation and participation. Dramaturgy traces the permeability of the choreographic process in its various forms and articulations and in this very process of revealing the artistic and social strategies of worldmaking, enables a dialog between artists, the audience and an Outside. A concept of the dramaturgical oriented along such lines and the protocols of encounters can reveal the potential of the choreographic to place the body, the dance as active agents in personal and social conflict zones.

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