

Communicating, Distilling, Catalyzing. On the Creation of Dance Congress Worlds

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“Taken together, dance supplies a record of where we have been and where we’d like to go, of how we move together and apart, of how we create the environments we inhabit and what we aspire to make of them” (Martin 2009), writes sociologist Randy Martin and makes a plea for concentrating on innovative powers, “those who assemble to create something hitherto unseen and disclose a different basis of incorporation” (id.).

In Martin’s utopian thinking, dance reflects our individual and social movements and perspectives. In its concentrated artistic form, it sheds light on the paths taken in the past, present and future. But dance is more than that – sociologists like Martin believe that movement contains social and political potential, even a formative strength that has the capacity to have social effect. He is thus not far from the question of whether ‘worldmaking’ is possible through art, through dance. Can dance create ‘world’? Or rather ‘worlds’?

The subject of ‘worldmaking’¹ with its possibilities and limitations proved to be essential in thinking about the Dance Congress 2009. It was inspired by a sa-

1 The concept of ‘worldmaking’ refers to Nelson Goodman’s “ways of creating worlds”. Goodman’s philosophy of art and knowledge is based on the idea that the world is not factual, but rather that knowledge of the world is always already ‘made’: “Furthermore, if worlds are as much made as found, so also knowing is as much remaking as reporting. All the processes of worldmaking I have discussed enter into knowing. Perceiving motion, we have seen, often consists in producing it. Discovering laws involves drafting them. Recognizing patterns is very much a matter of inventing and imposing them. Comprehension and creation go on together.” (Goodman 1978:

lon on choreographic modes of work at the Dance Congress 2006 in Berlin hosted by performance theorist André Lepecki and dramaturge Myriam Van Im-schoot. At that time, a suggestion by choreographer Thomas Lehmen that art (and other human activity) should be regarded as “making a piece of world” led to a controversy that inspired dramaturge Jeroen Peeters to ask himself in retrospect:

“Are you then adding, transforming, or creating a parallel universe? Who has access to the creation of reality, of the imagination and the representations that shape it? What is the artist’s role? What is the ideology behind it? Are we actually the producers of our own life and its conditions?” (Peeters 2007: 117)

The above mentioned relationship of dance and world, creation and worldmaking led in the preparations to the Dance Congress 2009 to questions concerning possible forms of globalized work environments and lifeworlds, the artistic and theoretical approaches to these worlds, the position of choreographers and their methods for creating and depicting worlds. From this perspective, dance becomes a kind of laboratory in which social and political developments can be tracked down and processed, and forms of communication and community reflected on and tested. Dance can absorb, distill, catalyze, analyze, create and, of course, criticize ‘worlds’, but it is equally dependent on the conditions of the world from which it emerges.²

At the same time, the concept of ‘worldmaking’ brought up questions of how a congress should be organized. How should a congress be constructed in order to facilitate understanding for and reflection of the different working worlds and perspectives of representatives from the fields of choreography, science, pedagogy, journalism and politics? How should it be conceived in terms of content, time and space so that protagonists from various fields of dance can play a part

22) This means that both the recognition of worlds, as well as their making is only possible through culturally influenced forms of access and that the processes that are necessary for descriptive worldmaking are always creative ones.

2) These thoughts take their inspiration from the ‘world’ concept of post-colonial theorist Homi K. Bhabha, according to whom modern, intercultural societies in a globalized world are ‘hybrid’ and thus subject to constant change. “To me, hybridization doesn’t simply mean mixing, but rather the strategic and selective appropriation of meaning, creating space for persons whose freedom and equality are in danger.” (Bhabha 2007: n.p.)

with very different motivations and in various forms and so that all participants can move about as freely as possible?

If we define a congress – in keeping with the idea of ‘worldmaking’ – as a “temporary collective living being that is not yet a state body, but after all already a congress body” (Ploebst 2009/1), or even as a “location where knowledge is not just transmitted, but also transpires” (Roms 2006), then further thoughts bring us to the following concrete realizations: there are no events without the movements of their participants, no worldmaking without (shared) steps. A congress is, truly, above all a temporary microcosm and in itself choreography.

And so, as we directed our attention from the greater/whole to the individual/detail, an easily understandable yet polysemantic congress motto emerged on the basis of the ‘worldmaking’ idea: “No Step without Movement!” A title, which both contains an implied invitation for all participants to actively help shape their own dance world(s) and which also, as author Helmut Ploebst pointed out, “almost inadvertently [...] sheds light [...] on the fact that no dance step can take place without inherent intellectual, cultural and political movement” (Ploebst 2009/1).

PROGRAM DEVELOPMENT AS A PARTICIPATORY PROCESS

The ‘social choreography’ of a dance congress with its thematic focuses and bifurcations, “combining threads, tight bundles and diffuse clouds” (id.) is, on the one hand, directly dependent upon the paths and meetings, communications and decisions taken and made beforehand. On the other hand, as a first part of the curatorial process, these preparations are also very much the product of the actual social, as well as political conditions prevalent in culture and education of the particular, specific era that it is taking place in.

While the Dance Congress 2006 sought to establish dance as a culture of knowledge with the programmatic statement of “Knowledge in Movement”, as well as raise awareness for a dance scene, which was at the time just beginning to assert itself, the Congress in 2009 was more concerned with the social, political and aesthetic position of dance in theory and practice. The winding path in the search for topics had as its starting point the very different situations that existed in the dance scene in 2006 and 2009: the establishment of strong national and international networks and organizations, which brought together various protagonists in the dance field, had just begun in 2006. Important initiatives such as *Tanzplan Deutschland* or the *Ständige Konferenz Tanz*, who in retrospect

have both provided the dance scene with sustainable impulses, already existed – but they did not yet have the years of experience, which three years later contributed to the discussions. The period around 2006 was characterized most of all by the new perspectives afforded by the 12.5 million Euro budget of Tanzplan Deutschland, which sparked hopes, visions and prospects in the dance scene.

Compared to the second Dance Congress, the 2006 event, which was initiated by the German Federal Cultural Foundation and inspired by the dance congresses of the 1920s³, was more a first inventory of current trends and debates in classical and contemporary dance, dance pedagogy and academia. In numerous individual discussions with dance protagonists, we filtered out positions and ascertained topics that took their bearings, among other things, from the latest fields of research in dance studies. These were then specified in discussions with a work group in order to finally invite appropriate lecturers.

In contrast, the program of the Dance Congress 2009⁴ was created with a different, more complex approach, which went through numerous phases. Basically our goal was to develop the most urgent topics of the heterogeneous dance scene as close to the actual reality of them as possible and to open up more appropriate spaces of reflection and action in order to facilitate this dance congress as a “highly dynamic, virtual system” (Ploebst 2009/1).

This other approach was the result of our experiences from the first congress, which Jeroen Peeters describes as follows using the example of one of the salons:

3 Patricia Stöckemann on the dance congresses of the 1920s: “In a sustained way, they raised public awareness in Germany for dance [...]. They created the first forums for discussion about dance, demonstrated where dance and dancers stood aesthetically, theoretically and socially; they discussed grievances, developed visions and concrete steps towards qualified training for modern dancers, the establishment of a first dance university and dance as an academic discipline, the promotion of amateur dance or improving the social equality of dancers in society. [...] The dance congresses [...] were meeting places, spaces for debate and exchange between dance protagonists from all fields: dancers, choreographers, dance teachers, as well as those who accompany dance by writing, reflecting and criticizing.” (Stöckemann 2006: 10) Despite the different founding histories, the two dance congresses in 2006 and 2009 reflect the enormous charisma of the original congresses.

4 The Dance Congress in 2009 was once again mainly financed by the German Federal Cultural Foundation, as well as supported by the Department for Culture, Sports and Media of the City of Hamburg and the German Research Foundation.

“Throughout the salon, people’s eagerness to speak up, make themselves heard and participate in the conversation was striking. It was perhaps symptomatic of the institutionalized German dance field, in which many artists are invisible, and of a congress that left little space for audience participation and artists’ voices.” (Peeters 2007: 114)

As it had been the case in 2006, we also consciously avoided the usual procedures followed for academic congresses in our development of the program for the Dance Congress 2009. Instead of posting a ‘call for papers’, topics were compiled in four Open Think Tanks offered in the context of various festivals in Hamburg, Berlin, Munich and Düsseldorf. According to the ‘Open Space’ method developed by Harrison Owen in 1985 in the USA for big conferences, all participants – in total more than one hundred dancers, choreographers, dance teachers, scholars, curators and producers – were asked to contribute their ideas, questions, positions, methods and visions of current art production and work contexts. These were then discussed in spontaneously formed work groups.⁵

The entire agenda of the Think Tanks grew out of the intentions, suggestions and self-organization of the participants, who met for the first time in this constellation. In these laboratories, the dance scene took on an initial, highly active part in designing the program for the Dance Congress 2009.

In the subsequent evaluation of the Think Tanks, thematic catchwords were formed out of the documentation of the work groups. These were then clustered into larger topics and finally structured into so-called mind maps. In addition to this participatory model of finding topics, we were also in active contact with representatives of the most recent German networks, initiatives and projects (Association of German Dance Archives, Federal Association of Dance in Schools, Dance Education Conference, and others) as well as the Center for Performance Studies at the University Hamburg to set the agenda. These diverse proposals and discussions concerning what contents could be essential were the basis for the development of ideas for formats and possible lecturers; out of which, in turn, topics were specified, substantiated or even rejected. The following four thematic complexes emerged from these processes: Dance and Politics, Creation and Reflection, Dance (Hi)Stories and Life Stories. Various performances that experimented with new forms and served as inspiration for unusual congress formats also played a large role. One such example was *Générique* by the Eve-

5 The topics were, among others: writing dance history, the social situation of dancers, dance in schools, education, dance politics, trans-disciplinarity, dance and communication, curating dance, community dance, financial and work structures, dancers as experts, dance and music, the relationship between practice and theory.

rybodys artist collective – a public discussion about a piece that does not exist, in which the collective act of imagination itself becomes the performance. Or the radio performance by the artist group LIGNA, in which the audience explores the space by following instructions given to them via headsets, thereby testing four approaches to utopian movement. In addition, there were a number of work groups who met beforehand by invitation only and whose results were presented as part of the congress, as well as cooperation partners, who had a decisive effect on the development of the program.⁶

For some topics and items on the agenda, we passed on the responsibility to choreographers, theorists, pedagogues, etc. After consulting with us, they chose the speakers and translated the topics into appropriate formats of presentation. This selective delegation of responsibility brought with it new challenges: the struggle to find the ‘right’ contents – i.e. those oriented towards current debates – and thematic accents, as well as formats that were realistic in terms of time and place, required balancing the odds, a willingness to compromise, as well as the ability to find solutions for all in common dialogue. These were all essential curatorial strategies in this phase.

The four thematic complexes⁷, which structured the program at the end of this decision-making process, emerged less as a result of a straightforward objective or the realization of a given concept; it was more the result of participatory and communicative processes with numerous participants. This amounted to arriving at the structure of a congress along winding paths: topics, formats and choice of personnel meander, shift and change; the development process is like a constant see-saw, demanding an incessant willingness to communicate and openness, as well as a precise balance of priorities – especially when one is dealing with such a large array of topics.

6 These cooperation partners were curators, artists and academics: Amelie Deuflhard, Anne Kersting, Jochen Roller (Kampnagel Hamburg), Kerstin Evert, Matthias Quabbe (K3-Center for Choreography/Tanzplan Hamburg), Gabriele Klein, Sandra Noth (University Hamburg, Performance Studies). Other important partners were the German Federal Cultural Foundation, as well as the Tanzplan Deutschland with its experiences gained from its own initiatives: Dance Education Conference, Tanzplan Local, Association of German Dance Archives. Susanne Foellmer also contributed significantly to the development of the program as research associate to the Dance Congress.

7 Dance and Politics, Creation und Reflection, Dance (Hi)Stories, Life Stories, see website <http://www.tanzkongress.de>.

Given this development, a particular goal of the Dance Congress 2009 was to apply participatory formats. In addition to conventional ways of doing things such as like lectures and podiums, the dominant formats were ones in which the congress participants could actively take part in the discussion and thought processes, or where methods and techniques could be experienced hands-on. We experimented with laboratories, salons, lecture performances, toolboxes and public master classes. Different lecture formats gave impulses from an artistic or theoretical perspective. In the lecture demonstration *Choreographic Thinking Tools*, for example, cognitive scientists, an artist and a dance researcher examined physical and mental processes of creating images. The public could listen in on professional debates such as in *Curating/Producing between Theory and Practice*, where in a 'Q & A' format questions concerning curatorial strategies were discussed together with both curators and artists. Laboratories requested that participants contribute their respective expertise to collaboratively work on results. And after a practical demonstration by school children in the lab *Dance in Schools – Eyes on Quality*, quality criteria for teaching dance in schools was presented and discussed. In master classes, toolboxes and seminars, methods and techniques were tested. The program explicitly aimed at providing events in which theorists and practitioners could enter into dialogue or try out new training methods, choreographic techniques and pedagogical approaches.

It is precisely this difference in formats and the systematic association of theory and practice that distinguishes a dance congress from other, purely academic congresses. A dance congress therefore also requires an accompanying and up-to-date dance program that inspires and expands the contents of debate and is developed in direct relation to the topics of the congress. An event of this size and complexity demands a location that allows for the implementation of a wide array of events and for intense interaction between different formats. As a space in which artistic reflection and production are standard practice, Kampnagel, with its multitude of rehearsal and performance spaces, proved to be an ideal location for spontaneous discussions, in-depth expert debate and interdisciplinary meetings.

HOW WOULD YOU LIKE TO WORK TOMORROW?

In contrast to a dance festival, which asserts a clear curatorial position by presenting 'finished' productions for the audience, critics and programmers to deal with, the preparation of a dance congress is more a question of providing space for topics, propositions, issues and discourse about the art form as such; to facili-

tate collective thinking about artistic practice, techniques, structures, work processes and forms of production for contemporary and classical dance, as well as its aesthetic perspectives and potential in cultural politics.

Both the interaction of theory and practice, as well as cross-genre work, can trigger ideas and new substantial co-operations, which will ideally maintain a sustainable effect even after the end of the congress.

“Each congress, even the most boring one, creates a highly dynamic virtual system whose overall performance is composed of the individuated experiences of participants and visitors; but not only in the moment of giving or receiving information, but instead first and foremost thanks to the system’s influence on the behavior of all participants after the congress and on how their communication ‘afterwards’ is influenced by the congress’s contents.” (Ploebst 2009/1)

Dance congress worlds create temporary communities: meetings of individuals from different cultural backgrounds, who – as in any form of artistic production – are brought together by the shared act of searching for new forms and working methods. Ideally, this ‘worldmaking’ of a dance congress prompts short or long term processes of realization and understanding, which then actively shape dance and its conditions (cf. Goodman 1978).

Evaluating a dance congress also means thinking about omissions and gaps in these temporary worlds. A central thematic focus for the next congress could thus be “an extended, transmedial definition of art, which permits the use of strategies from choreography and dance together with all other all existing and still to-be-developed artistic means [...]” (Ploebst 2009/2). One consideration is to give grants to research projects, as in-depth research and experimentation with form often suffers in artistic processes under the tight time schedule of having to produce. Such research projects could, on the one hand, permit more intensive trans-disciplinary collaboration with other artistic genres and, on the other hand, support advanced theoretical study in cooperation with experts. In addition to an increased interdisciplinary focus that concentrates on neighboring genres as ‘accomplices’ of dance, cooperation and networking between the various kinds of stage dance and its representatives, as well as the activation of municipal and state theaters and their dance ensembles could be pursued further.

From the current perspective, we also see more emphasis placed on the subject of dance and politics, as well as dance and the economy. How will the context of aesthetic and political, resp. economic issues change in the future? Will the ‘crisis’, which is not just economic, but also social, influence dance as an art form or the form and content of the next dance congress? And if so, how?

Enough questions and opportunities to therefore mobilize the “innovative powers” as Randy Martin calls them and to concentrate on the role of the curator as described by Hans Ulrich Obrist:

“The curator is an administrator, sensitive lover, author of prefaces, librarian, manager, accountant, animator, conservator, financier, diplomat, watchdog, exhibition guide, press attaché, transporter. [...] He is a catalyst and *passerelle* between art and the world; he opens up complementary paths and develops new possibilities and contexts that would otherwise remain inaccessible.” (Obrist 1996: 10-11)

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