



1 Pina Bausch  
during rehearsals for *Ahnen*  
Wuppertal, 1987



# Translating (into) the Present: Doing Contemporaneity

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“**H**OW and for how long can [dance theater’s, GK] corporeal, speechless potential for protest assert itself against the market, against being marketed as an innovative form of theater? [...] When will dance theater pieces finally become monumental tableaus?”<sup>1</sup> Susanne Schlicher poses these questions in her groundbreaking book *TanzTheater* from 1987. As early as in the mid-1980s, academics were already asking how long it would take before an innovative art form created in the 1970s would be conventionalized, would become routine, part of the canon of established art forms, how long it would take until everybody got used to its artistic style, its working methods, its repertoire. In much the same vein, by the 1980s, some journalists and critics were already complaining that the Tanztheater Wuppertal’s new pieces were not showing anything original, that they had become thematically and aesthetically repetitive (→ RECEPTION). Today, more than three decades after the publication of Susanne Schlicher’s book, dance theater – including the dance theater of the 1970s – is no longer considered protest art. Now, the term ‘protest art’ itself seems outdated, although even in its early days, the term did not really reflect the way that dance theater saw itself. However, the questions posed by Susanne Schlicher are still – or once again – relevant. Since the death of Pina Bausch in 2009, there has been incessant and almost worldwide debate over whether her dance pieces can and should be preserved, whether they are still contemporary, whether performing older pieces will lead to their musealization and, finally, whether the pieces lose some of what once distinguished them when they are restaged: aesthetic innovation, the transcendence of the boundaries of individual art forms, the unpredictable, the performative, the non-representational and the non-theatrical.

The pieces are in fact characterized by three different temporal layers, all of which are interwoven into each performance: first, there is that which I deliberately differentiate from ‘the present’ and refer to as the ‘here and now’ (*Jetzt-Zeit*), in which rehearsals take

place and the piece is passed on to younger dancers (→ WORKING PROCESS). This practice of passing on pieces has now spanned several decades and some generations of dancers. This constant process of restaging the pieces has ascribed the temporal art form of dance with a timelessness; it can therefore potentially be performed over and over again, regardless of the respective historical context. The here and now is also when a piece is performed (again). The second temporality is historical time: the creation of the choreography and its premiere. The performance taking place in the here and now is a memory and reenactment of this choreography, a document of Pina Bausch's choreographic art and her dancers' ingenuity at the time, as well as a historical document of the translation of that period's political, social and cultural perceptions and experiences into dance. At the same time, the restaging repositions the piece in a different historical context with different performers, where it is received by an audience with different perceptual habits and visual experiences. The third temporality relates to the Tanztheater Wuppertal dancers themselves, who reperform the piece decades after its premiere. And it is also here, in the interplay between generations of dancers, that the temporal layers intertwine (→ COMPANY): some pieces are still being danced by members of the original cast, even 40 years after the premiere, a period of time that is generally longer than a professional dancer's career. The 2017 performances of *Viktor* (PREMIERE 1986), for example, featured 23 dancers, including three dancers from the original cast: Dominique Mercy and Julie Anne Stanzak, as well as a former member of the company, Jean-Laurent Sasportes, who performed as a guest. However, not one dancer from the original cast was still involved in the 2019 restaging of *1980* (PREMIERE 1980), although almost all of the performers had been working with Pina Bausch for years, unlike in the case of *Nefés* (PREMIERE 2003), where more than half of the dancers onstage in 2019 had joined the company after the choreographer's death and, in some cases, had never met Pina Bausch in person. Thus, there has now been a complete change of generations in all of the pieces (→ COMPANY), in some pieces even several. This process of transformation, which has sometimes spanned several generations of dancers, has not been abrupt, but has taken place step by step. These steps are constant acts of translation, for, in the last few decades, the pieces have been restaged and sent on tour over and over again, meaning that they have been repeatedly rehearsed, sometimes with new or different dancers, which – while Pina Bausch was still alive (→ WORK PROCESS) – also led to the pieces themselves being changed, shortened or individual parts rearranged.

Pina Bausch herself tried to keep her work alive by continually restaging it. On the one hand, she thus ascribed a timelessness

to her pieces. On the other hand, she also showed that modernity in dance means more than (primarily) striving for innovation or dismissing what has already been accomplished as obsolete. Instead, it is about making the modernity that has become historical contemporary once more in and through dancing bodies. At the same time, she was able to show that her pieces can generate a different kind of relevance in other temporal contexts, even if they are based on the specific working processes of the company and the situative temporal experiences made by its members (→ WORK PROCESS). What is special about dance is perhaps that it is a temporal art form in this multiple sense, as dance is not just contemporary due to the fact that it only exists in the moment that it is being danced, but also because multiple layers of time overlap in that very moment.

From this point of view, Pina Bausch's pieces are historical, topical and timeless, all at the same time: they are closely tied to the everyday cultural and situational experiences of the company and the audience at the time they are created; they are performed in multiple presents, where they are perceived by each audience as being either topical, historical or timeless. It would therefore be short-sighted to simply regard them as monuments of dance history, like some classical works of ballet that are performed again and again out of respect for the history of 'high' European culture. Conversely, however, it would also be false to either assume that dance pieces are timeless or to view the restaging of a piece in another historical and situational context in front of a different audience *per se* as proof of its topicality. Instead, it is precisely the pieces of the Tanztheater Wuppertal and the way that they interweave various temporal layers in connection with their distinct translation processes that raises the question of what can be regarded as contemporary at all. This final chapter poses this very question by taking a look at the temporality of translation and considering it together with the concept of contemporaneity.

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### **What is contemporaneity?**

In Western cultures, the concept of contemporaneity first arose in the early modern period (1500-1800), in an era when the concept of time itself was being renegotiated in the wake of the invention of the clock and the ensuing objectification and linearization of time. In other words: 'time' has since been regulated by and through technical inventions, and globally controlled by the early capitalist, colonial European countries that initiated these technical developments. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, with the advent of Western modernity, early industrialization, the Enlightenment and the French Revolution, the term 'contemporary' took on great importance. As early as in 1764,

Voltaire declared that all should “conformez-vous aux temps,”<sup>2</sup> i.e., establish a relationship to their own time and adapt to it, with the primary aim of being able to take a critical look at it. In his *Hyperion* from 1794, Friedrich Hölderlin addressed, “O you who share with me this age!”<sup>3</sup> while Johann Wolfgang von Goethe on September 20, 1792, proclaimed an often-repeated sentence to commemorate the Battle of Valmy that would have a lasting influence on our understanding of contemporaneity: “From this place and from this day forth commences a new era in the world’s history, and you can all say that you were present at its birth.”<sup>4</sup> According to historian Lucian Hölscher, since the Enlightenment, ‘contemporaneity’ has meant, “a temporal connection to the simultaneity of events and people.”<sup>5</sup> However, this means not only being together in time but also self-reflective participation. A contemporary is somebody who sets him- or herself in relation to time – and this is not a purely individual affair.

Contemporaries are thus people who share something with each other, and that something is ‘time.’ This definition contains a dual promise: firstly, that it is possible to connect with someone in relation to time and, secondly, that it is possible to connect with time itself. But: does ‘time’ exist? Is ‘time’ not something that depends on people’s perceptions and experiences, i.e., that differs historically, socially and culturally? And is it not precisely Pina Bausch’s pieces – which were developed at different times and, in the case of the coproductions, in different cultural locations with an international company – that have proven the latter to be the case?

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### **Contemporary art / contemporary dance**

Works of art, in particular ephemeral works of dance, are paradoxical phenomena in terms of their relationship to time: on the one hand, they were created at a specific time and relate to that time, but, on the other, they are timeless and sometimes outlast epochs, like works of classical or romantic ballet. Unlike in the visual arts, works in the performing arts are bound to their performances and their forms of embodiment. Both artworks and dance pieces may lose historical relevance, but aesthetically they remain identical with themselves. Their value on the art market can fluctuate, which is also due to the way that different periods evaluate them in different ways and attribute different levels of relevance to them.

The established definition of ‘contemporary art’ that will serve as our starting point here is something that is produced by contemporaries and perceived by other contemporaries to be significant. This definition assumes that contemporaneity can only be produced in the present, in the here and now. It does not address what kind of relationship there has to be between artistic production

and the here and now in order for art to be considered contemporary. But it does draw attention to one important aspect that is above all constitutive of the praxeology of translation presented in this book: contemporaneity is a performative concept that cannot just be asserted – it must also be authenticated. Contemporaneity is thus ascribed to a production in a performative process, thereby referring to the interplay between piece, performance, perception, knowledge and context. Three layers of temporality coincide in this interplay and what we usually label ‘the present’: what has developed into this very moment, what is happening here and now, and what is to come. Although the performance takes place in the present and presupposes copresence, it is also characterized by the translation of the piece into the present through the simultaneity of the here and now and historical time. The performance in the present also has an impact on what is still to come, for example, on future discourse about the piece.

This simultaneity of temporalities intersecting in the here and now also characterizes the audience’s perception: just as the piece itself connects different temporal layers with each other in its performance, so are they, too, shaped by the simultaneity and entanglement of different temporalities in the audience’s perception (→ RECEPTION) – in other words: they are clearly and unquestioningly regarded neither as topical nor as outdated or old-fashioned. In this respect, the entanglement between performance, perception and knowledge should not be understood as a mere conventionalization or historicization of a dance piece. For the aesthetic, media and cultural translations that take place back and forth between performance, perception and knowledge always have a transformational effect on situative perception and the future discursive positioning of the piece. Thus, they not only shape the perception situation, its eventfulness and aura but also preform the future – as expectations and as the production of new knowledge.

That which is ascribed the attribute ‘contemporary’ in the particular work of art therefore makes reference to more than just the respective contemporary art form. “All significant art, all art in the emphatic sense, is contemporary. It has significance for the present,” writes philosopher Juliane Rebentisch, arguing against the attribute ‘contemporary’ as an “additional quality (*Zusatzqualität*)”<sup>6</sup> for works of art. Her position also contains another consideration: whether or not an artwork is perceived as contemporary depends on its frame of reference in the present, on the way that it is contextualized in the specific situation. But who determines whether a work of art has meaning for the present and when? The answer to this question lies in the cultural-political strategies of the global art market and in a number of positions in art philosophy. Today’s

concept of contemporaneity lies between these two poles, and this is also where we find its limits and potential.

As a strategic marketing term, the adjective ‘contemporary’ has become a criterion of distribution since the globalization of the art market began in the 1990s. As such, it has replaced the term ‘modern art,’ which is now bound to a specific aesthetic with its origins in historical modernity. “Today,” as journalist and translator Henning Ritter writes, the contemporary is “not an artistic statement, but a property of the art system.”<sup>7</sup> He criticizes the current art system’s fixation on the contemporary. Accordingly, he says, ‘contemporary art’ indiscriminately refers to any artistic product or production that has been recognized and absorbed by the art system in any way. Following this train of thought, the contemporary is not an exclusively aesthetic concept, but is also a strategically relevant concept in art marketing.

So far, only a few authors have drawn attention to the relevance of the attribute ‘contemporary’ as an exchange value for art in the global art market. Contemporary art should therefore be distinguished from the concept of ‘modern art’ that is anchored in historical modernism, which claimed that it could create new worlds by means of aesthetics. Contemporaneity in art – or ‘contemporary art’ – is, however, a *topos* used to shape cultural policy, to include and exclude, to carry out various demarcations (for example, from modernity, from tradition, from other cultures and their arts) and to regulate the global art market. Current practices in the global art business remain Western. Historian Ljudmila Belkin therefore describes ‘contemporary art’ as “a value concept with a selective function: it determines what art is and what it is not.”<sup>8</sup> The term ‘contemporary art’ is thus, in Pierre Bourdieu’s words, a “mark of distinction”<sup>9</sup> in the globalized field of art that is used to conduct politics by classifying the respective work of art as new or as outdated, i.e., as (ir-)relevant to the present. In the performing arts as well, the administrators of this system are the legitimized spokespeople, curators, organizers, journalists and representatives of cultural institutions who operate according to the standards of the art market guided by Western principles. Even if modern art can no longer make claims to hegemony in the age of globalized artistic practice, where the relationship between modernity and tradition is no longer considered exclusionary (as it was in Western modernity), new hegemonic practices of inclusion and exclusion have (re)established themselves through the term ‘contemporary’.

In the 1990s, Pina Bausch’s pieces became a global commodity. The opening of the global art market on the one hand and the increasing number of coproductions on the other both played a part in this development. The aesthetics of the pieces changed from the

Erstklässler am 12. Juni 2009  
Tanzende Pflanzen von Pina Bausch  
Foto: Peter Pabst, Nicolas Plavonka, Pina Bausch





2 Program booklet for  
“...como el mosquito en la piedra,  
ay si, si, si...”, 2009

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3 Reproduction of the Lichtburg,  
the Tanztheater Wuppertal's  
rehearsal space; from the exhibit  
*Pina Bausch and the Tanztheater*  
Bonn, 2016

mid-1990s – toward more dance, especially solos, increasingly beautiful and elegant evening gowns, more lightness – helping to facilitate and promote the global circulation of the pieces, which was in turn driven by the support of powerful cultural institutions such as the Goethe-Institut and other collaborating partners. This kind of politics asserted that the pieces had relevance for the present, which was legitimized above all by the working methods used in the coproductions. These were thus not only an economically necessary (→ PIECES) and aesthetically enriching (→ WORK PROCESS) tool for the company. The coproductions were also a political tool for national cultural policies aimed at drawing the attention of a global art market.

### A contemporaneity open to the future

In addition to its significance in terms of art market strategy, the term ‘contemporary’ also has utopian potential, which has mainly been attributed to it by thinkers in the philosophy of art. As Giorgio Agamben says: “Those who are truly contemporary, who truly belong to their time, are those who neither perfectly coincide with it nor adjust themselves to its demands. They are thus in this sense irrelevant (*inatturale*). But precisely because of this condition, precisely through this disconnection and this anachronism, they are more capable than others of perceiving and grasping their own time. [...]. The contemporary is he who firmly holds his gaze on his own time so as to perceive not its light but rather its darkness. [...]. The ones who can call themselves contemporary are only those who do not allow themselves to be blinded by the lights of the century, and so manage to get a glimpse of the shadows in those lights, of their intimate obscurity.”<sup>10</sup> This understanding of contemporaneity, formulated in reference to Friedrich Nietzsche’s *Untimely Meditations*,<sup>11</sup> is based on the latter’s much-cited “pathos of distance.”

Contemporary art thus emerges where something is of ‘concern,’ where the goal is to have a true experience of the present. The production, but also the authentication of the significance of a dance piece for the present is therefore based on a relationship to the present that is shaped by critical distance. A certain distance to the here and now, an act of setting oneself in relation to one’s own present is required in order to ask: what can a dance piece, even if it was developed decades ago, tell us about our present?

From a philosophical perspective, ‘contemporary’ means not only being able to distance oneself but also having a passion for the present.<sup>12</sup> As literary scholar Sandro Zanetti puts it, “only in a passion for the present that crosses one’s own horizon but is registered as a transgression is it possible to foster a contemporaneity that is open to the present, but also open to the future (because it cannot be kept

in the present)."<sup>13</sup> It should be added that this is a passion that is aware of the existence of multiple presents and thus of different understandings of temporality. If we follow this line of thought, contemporaneity in art is based on a practice of translation that sets itself in relation to the respective present. A practice of translation that is critical toward the present thus consists in creating temporal dis/continuities, in balancing distance and proximity, and in criticizing and empathizing with the respective present. With this practice of translation, contemporary art defines itself neither through its distance to a past that has been pronounced closed (modernity) nor through a culture that has been declared different (popular dance culture, coproducing country). Instead, contemporary art is defined by multiple relations to, extensions and refractions of history and cultures, which it acknowledges and processes, i.e., aesthetically and discursively translates and artistically and politically frames.

In this sense, Pina Bausch's pieces are contemporary in that they typically feature a balance between a distance to and a passion for the time when they were created. The coproductions in particular were created at a distance to and with respect for the foreign culture. The working process, with its methods of 'asking questions' and research trips, was based on the everyday empathies of all members of the company. Their cultural perceptions and experiences were then translated into an aesthetic form, the dance piece, meaning that it was not simply a matter of creating distance between the piece on the one hand and the situative perception and experience on which it was based on the other during the step of aesthetically translating everyday experience into dance. Rather, the constant restagings have also allowed the pieces to be translated (back) into each respective present by transferring the performances into other temporal contexts, where they provide different audiences with the opportunity to question the relevance of the pieces for the present. In this way, each performance creates space for the audience to examine the topicality of the piece by linking it to their own time. The audience decides whether or not the piece is relevant to the present in which they are experiencing it. Thus, from a practice theory perspective, the contemporary is not inherent to the piece itself, but is generated in the interplay between the performance and the audience. A contemporaneity that is open to the future thus requires not just the artist but also the audience to be able to distance themselves from and foster a passion for their own time. It is these qualities that above all enable audiences to translate pieces into their own here and now and to decide whether they are relevant for a critical relationship to the present or whether they contribute to the musealization of dance and choreography.

Audience perception is determined by the audience's own process of becoming or having become, for example, by its habits of perception, visual experiences, routines of expectation and (dance-specific) knowledge. However, these habits can also be undermined, as a piece is always perceived differently in different situative and cultural contexts at different times. Thus, a piece is not only updated and carried forward into the future in restagings and new performances. These practices can also contribute to the musealization of pieces, as is the case for works of classical ballet. In fact, it is the performative dimension that is decisive: the dance piece is an unstable, flexible and constantly changing, contingent production created in the interplay between piece, restaging, performance, perception and knowledge – and not a supposedly timeless work that is meant to be preserved as such.

Pina Bausch brought her pieces into the future by restaging them again and again and thereby constantly translating them. It is yet to be seen whether "keeping them alive" like this, as Pina Bausch called it, will merely serve to preserve or musealize her cultural legacy or whether hers is a contemporaneity that is open to the future. This ambivalence is a genuine component of passing on and restaging pieces, and is a question that must be posed again and again. The answer to the question of which of her pieces are still relevant for the present cannot be decided alone by those who continue to put her pieces on the market or who define the discourse surrounding them, but will also be decided by the audience, who performatively authenticate the relevance of the pieces for the present. Once again, it is of considerable importance how exactly the practice of translating the piece into the new present is carried out. The 'faithful' reconstruction of a piece neither necessarily leads to its musealization, nor does its complete deconstruction inevitably promise to produce contemporary relevance in terms of a critical distance to the historical material. Instead, the 'how' is also dependent on the complex, performative interplay between piece, performance, perception and context to decide what kind of relevance the piece will have. Inherent to this hybrid and multifaceted practice of translation is the potential for both the musealization of a once revolutionary art form and a reception with contemporary relevance.

