Knowledge in Motion
Perspectives of Artistic and Scientific Research in Dance

Sabine Gehm,
Pirkko Husemann,
Katharina von Wilcke (eds.)
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Under the motto »Knowledge in Motion« the Dance Congress Germany took place from 20-23 April 2006 at the House of World Cultures in Berlin. The Dance Congress was a project initiated by the German Federal Cultural Foundation. Besides some of the lectures held at the Dance Congress the publication at hand includes further articles and interviews on the issue of the congress. Cf. also: http://www.tanzkongress.de

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For us, the Federal Cultural Foundation, who organised the first German dance congress in over fifty years in April 2006, the three legendary dancers’ congresses held in Magdeburg and Essen in the 1920s and in Munich in 1930 were our role models. The Dance Congress Germany was therefore an attempt at a new start. It established conscious links to the dance congresses of the Weimar era, to which dancers, choreographers, dance pedagogues, critics, theatre producers, musicians and many others interested in dance flocked in their hundreds in order to discuss issues and problems in various programme formats. They triggered astonishing developments in the process. In 1927 in Magdeburg, to mention just one example, Adolf Loos spoke of the return of dance to its natural state: the feet needed no longer be placed crossways, but were allowed to be positioned in parallel in a completely natural stance. Oskar Schlemmer in his turn presented his Triadic Ballet and emphasised the significance of abstraction in dance: there was enough chaos being created at the time and it was therefore a matter of priority to revert to the laws of space, form and colour. And naturally the pioneers of modern dance used the congresses to proclaim their own agendas. Mary Wigman gave a rousing speech on »dance in its absolute form«.¹ No more theatrical dance, she demanded, but »conquering the entire theatre by means of a dance-like gesture!«, this »grandiose play and mirror reflecting life!«²

¹ | Mary Wigman: »Der neue künstlerische Tanz und das Theater«, in: Hedwig Müller/Patricia Stöckemann (eds.): ... jeder Mensch ist ein Tänzer. Ausdruckstanz in Deutschland zwischen 1900 und 1945, Gießen: Anabas 1993, p. 77.
² | Ibid., p. 82.
This means that at the time, in addition to solidly uniting all dancers within a professional organisation, the focus was on dance as a means of liberation from strait-laced conventions, of comprehending a chaotic world through a new, danced order and asserting the autonomy of dance as an art form. However, the dance congresses soon came to a halt. At the beginning of the 1930s the NSDAP set a new course: no more dance revolutions, no unleashing of corporeity and liberation from forms that had become hollow, no emancipation of the body, but rather state rule over the body through mass parades, decreed folkloristic attitudes, formal rigidity in dance performance and ultimately »mechanisation« of the body in an all-out war. Dance therefore always bears the hallmark of its era and the inconsistencies of this era and the same also applies, of course, to the questions the respective society puts to dance.

Knowledge in motion was the motto of the Dance Congress Germany and is also the title of the resulting book presented here. Dance as a culture of knowledge was and is the thematic focus. Dance and knowledge – this raises many questions: What do we want and what does society want to learn from dance? What does the individual need to know in order to dance? What do we know when we dance? But also, and this seems the most interesting aspect to me: what does dance know about us that we do not know or only have a vague idea of or have forgotten? How can we convert this knowledge held by dance itself into motion?

The American philosopher Nelson Goodman, an expert in dance, said about the perception of art that there is more to seeing than meets the eye. This applies in a similar form to dance and is one of the reasons for the interest in dance recently shown by neurophysiology. The neuroscientist Wolf Singer is a case in point. His visits to the choreographies of William Forsythe motivated Singer to investigate the question of the physiological conditions of our perception of dance in neural terms. The answer is astonishing: watching dance causes our brain to simulate the range of movement we see on stage. Our brain participates in the motor performance of the dancers. This creates a process of interplay between those who move and those who watch the movement. Singer calls this resonance looping between dancers and audience »dynamic excitation patterns«.

The inference from this is that dance is infectious. It requires effort and it is virtually impossible not to react to expressive gestures, not to dance, at least internally, when others are moving. The separation of thinking and feeling from the movement of the body must be practiced in an enforced learning process and cannot fully succeed because our thinking is linked to our body.

Dancers have always been aware of this. Now science has followed suit. Advanced neuroscience has departed from the rationalism propa-
gated by the French philosopher René Descartes and the rigid body-soul dualism, which has led our thinking (and our bodies) towards progress since the Enlightenment and finally pushed them into a corner. It has dispensed with a notion of reason which, being a hegemonic instrument of control, excludes the body as an organ capable of knowledge. It focuses its attention on the body as a store of experience, as a place where pleasure and pain leave their marks and influence habits and the shape of life. At the end of scientific modernity our knowledge about knowledge starts moving again.

Brain research today, with all its sophisticated equipment and methods, follows the historical avant-garde of modern dance. Rudolph von Laban, Mary Wigman and Gret Palucca took, like Frederick Matthias Alexander or Moshe Feldenkrais, the first few practical steps towards rediscovering the body as a source of knowledge. They were pioneers who positioned dance against the ideologically adjusted body concepts of their time. They wanted to obtain harmony between body and mind. They were driven by a productive obsession, which included dance, theory and the desire for social reform in equal measure. And with the Berlin DANCE CONGRESS, too, we set ourselves the aim of enlightening minds through the body and of calling into question the dominance of one-dimensional rationality through the movement of our bodies.

But how can we learn more about the knowledge that is imprinted in our bodies? How do we overcome the chronic illiteracy of our ›age of reason‹ in understanding our body language? How can we discover and how can we use the semiotic richness that helps us to communicate, long before and long after ›words have been exchanged‹ and symbols produced?

The film Rhythm is it! documented in an extremely moving way the spectacular effect the dance project organised by the Berlin Philharmonic Orchestra in conjunction with British choreographer Royston Maldoom had on teenagers from ›socially marginalised areas‹. Why was that? Firstly, simply because Royston Maldoom did not have to start exporting dance to Berlin-Neukölln, it had already been there for a long time! On music videos, on the Hip-Hop-scene and throughout popular culture dance has been a central medium of expression for young people for decades, irrespective of whether they have a German, Turkish, Nigerian or Polish family background. But then something important was added: namely that choreographers and dancers insisted on discipline, perfection and perseverance, in short: on work, which is an absolute prerequisite for creating a new common form.

Dance – the film can also be interpreted in this way – has a positive impact on the growing-up process. This has also been supported by research, which has shown that young people less often stray off the straight and narrow if they dance on a regular basis and that learning to
dance also promotes the acquisition of school-based knowledge. Should this, i.e. the inadvertent dialectic triggered by the learning difficulties and concentration problems revealed in the Pisa survey, after all be the way to realising the old dream of dance as a school subject, as a means of educating people? As early as the 18th century the Swiss educationalist Johann Heinrich Pestalozzi had already tried in vain to gain acceptance for his plans for reform among his contemporaries.

Opening of Dance Congress Germany, 20 April 2006 at House of World Cultures, Berlin

I very much welcome the educational alliances which are currently being formed in many places across Germany in order to promote the integration of dance into the curriculum in our schools. However, dance should not be reduced to the role of „sweeper“ in educational reform strategies. Dance is more than an exercise designed for getting top marks for good behaviour and more than a treatment for hyperactivity. It is not an all-purpose educational weapon for disciplining poorly integrated teenagers. Children who are able to walk backwards become better students of mathematics – that would be a positive effect of dance programmes. However, I shudder at the thought of including movement exercises in mathematics teaching. Dance as an art form, which is what it is in the first place, must remain unimpeded. Resocialising young people or improving their achievements should not take priority, because in dance bodies learn about the ground under their feet and the effect of gravity. They learn about their freedom and their individual ability to overcome gravity, to jump, fly, flow and join forces in moving with others. They learn to find a form for their desire, their pain, their social drive and their impulse to place themselves in or against the world.

By promoting dance in the context of the »Tanzplan Deutschland« ini-
Tiative the German Cultural Foundation aims at creating spaces for such experiences. We want to give artists and cultural activists the opportunity to work freely, in the hope that they will provide us with all the material and knowledge necessary to better understand the world in order to find an answer to the question »Where do we want to move?«.

It is about keeping our knowledge in motion and, by doing so, being involved in a more comprehensive and more stimulating education. Not only is this our way out of the »self-inflicted mental immaturity« as Immanuel Kant said, but also the way out of »self-imposed inertia«. As quoted in Denis Diderot's Large Encyclopaedia of the Enlightenment Period:

Dance and song are as natural to humankind as gestures and voice. Ever since there have been human beings on Earth, there has doubtless been song and dance, people have sung and danced from the start of creation to the present day and it is more than likely that people will go on singing and dancing until the human race dies out completely.4

*Translation from German*

**References**

Wigman, Mary: »Der neue künstlerische Tanz und das Theater«, in: Hedwig Müller/Patricia Stöckemann (eds.): *... jeder Mensch ist ein Tänzer. Ausdruckstanz in Deutschland zwischen 1900 und 1945*, Gießen: Anabas 1993, pp. 77–82.

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www.tanzplan-deutschland.de.

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3 | The »Tanzplan« is a five-year funding programme for dance in Germany. In addition to the Dance Congress Germany, which marked the beginning of this initiative, the programme includes »Tanzplan local« projects in eight German towns and cities as well as the »Tanzplan educational programme«. Cf. www.tanzplan-deutschland.de from 11 May 2007.
