



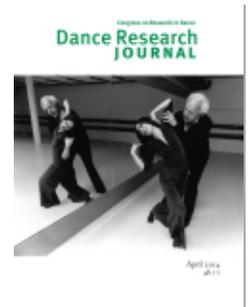
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New German Dance Studies ed. by Susan Manning and Lucia Ruprecht (review)

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New German Dance Studies

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Following the turn in the mid-1990s among American and British dance scholarship toward cultural studies and new historicism, one of the central preoccupations among scholars on dance has been to show the rest of the humanities just why dance is so important. In Germany after reunification, a similar turn occurred among German dance scholars, from an earlier, literary-critical orientation of *Germanistik* (German studies) toward a more interdisciplinary and methodologically expansive field of *Kulturwissenschaft* (cultural studies). Now, roughly twenty years later, the contours of this change come into focus.

New German Dance Studies, edited by Susan Manning and Lucia Ruprecht, shows the effect on dance scholarship in Germany as a result of the transition from dance framed in the context of philology to the study of dance as a part of the study of culture. Manning and Ruprecht's aim with *New German Dance Studies* is both straightforward and in step with the mission of dance studies more generally: to show how thinking about dance enriches cultural studies.¹

The shift from *Germanistik* to *Kulturwissenschaft* has led to many important changes among dance scholars. Prior to its cultural turn, dance scholarship in Germany operated vis-à-vis written language and under assumptions of the physical body as something "pre-discursive": weighted down by textual analysis, such scholarship largely subscribed to "dance's association with the unspeakable in the sense of that which must not be expressed—the socially or politically censored—and that which

cannot be expressed—the ineffable" (3). In the process, dance had become something untouchable, mystical, anti-intellectual. More importantly, moving bodies as objects of study found themselves locked inside a maze of assumptions, which remained unexamined by the discipline that purported to unlock its power for other disciplines.

Enter *Kulturwissenschaft*. Understood less as a theoretical or methodological trend in German (or European) scholarly debates of the late twentieth century, German cultural studies formed a discursive space to show "how current research operates both informed by and 'after' theory" (2). Such space, Manning and Ruprecht note, has enabled dance scholars to work against traditions of anti-intellectualism and exceptionalism about the body generated by earlier historiographies rooted in *Germanistik*. In the past few decades, dance scholars have successfully stepped beyond the shadow of the "dualisms of mind and body, page and stage" and the "melancholic awareness of the impermanence of the dancing body" that limit understandings about the body, dance, and movement (3–4).

As the fifteen essays collected in *New German Dance Studies* show, contemporary scholars on dance in the German-speaking world continue to carry the banner of both cultural studies and new historicism. Excavating conceptual origins and "ideological contexts that insist on dance as fleeting, indescribable movement," this wide-ranging collection of essays embraces interdisciplinarity, critical self-consciousness, sensitivity to power-structures undergirding scholarship and history, and a resistance to claims of inherent or essential truths. All of the essays in the volume operate on "the assumption that any type of cultural enunciation can be approached like a (polysemous) text" (9). Incorporating ideas of embodiment and embodied knowledge crucial to the foundation of dance studies as a field, these contemporary German dance scholars have begun to comprehensively consider the meaning and function of discourse based on the claims we make about the relationship between dance, knowledge, culture, and history.

At present, dance researchers on both sides of the Atlantic are in a position to make unique claims contributing to a wide body of scholarship in the humanities. Under the more general goal of showing how dance studies enriches

cultural studies, Manning and Ruprecht articulate the specific task of dance scholars as having to do with knowledge production. "If dance constitutes a culture of knowledge, in which ways does its dynamic, sensuous, and corporeal practice affect our general understanding of knowledge in diverse realms of the humanities, social sciences, and natural sciences?" (9). This is a question of no small import to dance scholars, and it is one with clear and vital implications across the academy. Answering it is not the stated goal of each essay collected in *New German Dance Studies*; taken as a whole, however, the anthology suggests some possible answers. Manning and Ruprecht did not conceive of the volume as a comprehensive endeavor. Instead, their goal is to demonstrate the "rich outpouring of scholarship on dance in the German-speaking world" in the past ten years and, in turn, provide ways to think through how the shift from a disciplinary practice to a more interdisciplinary one has affected dance scholarship (vii). In this sense, as the result of years of scholarly debates and discussions, *New German Dance Studies* emphasizes process as much as product.

The anthology is organized into three main groups, which form a loose chronology based around the content of the individual essays. First are essays having to do with discourse and text, and which concern pre-twentieth century topics; next are essays on dance during Weimar, the legacy of *Ausdruckstanz*, and performance in East Germany; last are contributions on *Konzeptanz* and "conceptual trends in recent theater dance that are only slowly finding an audience outside continental Europe" (1). These groupings speak to the current preoccupations of contemporary German dance scholars, as well as to a series of interests among scholars outside of the German-speaking world.

The first two chapters, "Affect, Discourse and Dance before 1900" by Christina Thurner, and "Lola Montez and Spanish Dance" by Claudia Jeschke, are examples of current scholarship informed by the legacy of *Germanistik* but not beholden to it. Together, they demonstrate "studies on dance and discourse [that] explore the descriptive and prescriptive potential of language that relates to the physical art, but also to the ways in which language may define a type of movement as dance in the first place, whether in an aesthetic, social, or

artistic framework" (3). In "Affect, Discourse and Dance Before 1900," for example, Thurner analyzes the work of ballet master and reformer Jean Georges Noverre to probe the origins of ideas about dance as a language of universal emotion. Noverre, whose 1760 *Lettres sur la Danse et de la Musique* was revolutionary for its insistence on dance as an independent art form, remains one of the foundational texts of the articulation of dance as a site for the generation of new kinds of knowledge about the body, about emotions, and about nature.

Focusing primarily on dance as text rather than as movement or embodied performance, Thurner makes the case that stereotypes of dance performance as fleeting emotionalism, which over time have led to contemporary, problematic conceptions of a "universal language of dance," began in eighteenth-century debates on dance reform sparked by Noverre. Placing Noverre's calls for dance's autonomy and his idea of ballet as the "living picture of the passions" in the larger picture of aesthetic debates at the turn of the nineteenth century, Thurner argues that current experiences of watching dance have their origins in discourses defined by Noverre. Locked into a series of relationships about how ideas such as truth, emotional expressivity, nature, and selfhood are communicated via movement, dance as defined by Noverre "for the most part ignores the parameters that allow us to perceive the interactions between dancers and audiences as immediate, as the double movement of an emotional relationship in motion" (26).

Thurner's probing of the origins of a "universal language of dance" is a much needed one, and her suggestion that such language has roots in eighteenth-century ballet reform is provocative. Yet she tries to cover too much ground in too short an essay. She briefly touches on the arrival of emotion as an important criteria in the experience and creation of artistic works by invoking a probable (though unexplored) connection between Noverre and German romantic philosopher Friedrich Schiller; similarly, she makes gestures toward situating Noverre's understanding of discourse in emergent forms of German literary and philosophical romanticism in the closing years of the eighteenth century, but does not follow through with any detail. Also absent in the essay is a

basic historical context crucial to understanding the impetus behind Noverre's ideas: how his own career as a professional artist, his social status, the political tenor of France just prior to the revolution, and the various formal conventions within eighteenth-century aesthetics may have shaped his ideas on dance as the communication of feelings, as the relationship between performer and spectator, and his sense of dance as an exceptional artistic form. Last but not least, Thurner misreads Noverre's basic argument in *Lettres* altogether, suggesting that Noverre advocated for dance as imitation, rather than representation (for example, page 20), when Noverre stated the reverse.

In "Lola Montez and Spanish Dance," Claudia Jeschke explores how the memoir, a textual form crucial for many dance scholars, serves as a discursive space to expose new kinds of knowledge—in this case, knowledge of national identity. Montez, née Eliza Gilbert, was an untrained dancer whose reputation as a performer grew as she skillfully harnessed attitudes towards ethnicity and femininity in circulation at a time when dance was blossoming into a commercial industry (this was helped, no doubt, by her affair with King Ludwig I of Bavaria). Negotiating her public persona and private life, Montez is a fascinating example of how knowledge of one's identity can be articulated as movement through transnational embodiment: "Irish through my father, Spanish through my mother, English through my education, French by inclination and cosmopolitan through the circumstances, I can say of myself that I belong to all nations or none" (32).

Like Jeschke and Thurner, contributors in the second major group of essays turn to biography to probe how the "dynamic, sensuous, and corporeal practice" of dance brings us closer to new epistemologies about the body, culture, and history. The biographical approach is not a new one: German dance scholarship in the 1980s and 1990s predominantly employed biography as a way to analyze for the first time the relationship—or, more bluntly, the alliance—between *Ausdruckstanz* choreographers and National Socialism. However, one major difference between biographical methods used today and those previously employed concerns representations of dance during the Weimar Republic; this illustrates a shift away

from a narrower focus on the connection between dance in Weimar and its fate under Nazism to a more expansive concern for Weimar dance relative to other media, issues of exile, and its postwar status in cultural memory.

The changes to scholarly use of biography in light of the turn toward *Kulturwissenschaft*—and in addition to the opening up of East German archives and the release of new information on the Nazi period following the fall of the Berlin Wall and reunification in 1990 (something which Manning and Ruprecht do not mention in their introduction)—is clear. Despite this, it is interesting that new German dance studies still has one foot in what seems to be a longstanding tradition among German dance scholars: German dance monographs in the 1920s—by Hans Brandenburg and Fred Hildenbrant, for example—likewise focused on the lives of individual dancers and choreographers as a method for excavating the meaning and purpose of dance.² While I am by no means suggesting that dance scholars in the German-speaking world are on some kind of special path via the biography, it is a point worth noting.

The second grouping of essays shifts from discussions primarily of dance and text to discussions of dance and visual art, film, and politics. In "Picturing Palucca at the Bauhaus," Susan Funkenstein shows how choreographer Gret Palucca fashioned, through her professional career and dance collaborations with members of the Bauhaus in the 1920s, a particular kind of discursive gaze. Many Bauhaus artists, including Marianne Brandt and László Moholy-Nagy, were captivated by Palucca's movement—in particular, Palucca's famous leaps—and through their visual and photographic representations of her dancing developed a vision of femininity rooted in a projection of power and professionalism. Palucca, in turn, skillfully harnessed these visual projections to gain a wider following among students and dancers, which in turn advanced her own career as a teacher, performer, and choreographer. Ultimately, Funkenstein argues, this dynamic reveals a more general understanding of the Bauhaus's artistic goals as embodied, in which "the pursuit of modernism and the expression of the body, on stage and as an everyday dynamic, were seen by the younger Bauhaus generation as one and the same" (59).

Essays by Kate Elswit, Tresa Randall, and Marion Kant also focus on particular biographies to analyze dance as a site for knowledge about emigration, exile, and alienation. In “Hanya Holm and an American *Tanzgemeinschaft*,” for example, Randall narrates how Hanya Holm, in the early years of her American emigration, believed that “German modern dance was intended to be a *solution* to the modern condition of alienation” (81). Randall does an excellent job of explaining Holm’s conception of *Tanzgemeinschaft* as a new form of communal-artistic organization and how the idea of the *Tanzgemeinschaft* potentially provides a frame for understanding the work and ideas of German émigré modern dancers. She stops short, however, of explaining how Holm’s ideas, as well as the dialogues with Mary Wigman that shaped them, better clarify the more fundamental yet equally politicized concept of *Gemeinschaft*. By restricting the scope of her argument, Randall misses a clear opportunity to stake intellectual claims that, through dance, speak to wider scholarship.

In “Back Again? Valeska Gert’s Exiles,” Kate Elswit explains how for Gert, alienation was not a problem to be solved but an opportunity to be seized. As Elswit shows, Gert’s performances in the early postwar years provided West German audiences with “safe” ways to experience the landscape of emotional alienation caused by Hitler’s regime. Using Gert to redefine estrangement as an embodied, discursive encounter, Elswit rethinks issues of “Germanness,” particularly with respect to representations of Weimar in the postwar period. Distinguishing the various types of exile Gert experienced throughout her life—from her status as “outsider as insider” during the Weimar years, to her physical and political exile during the war, to her early postwar re-immigration to Germany that exiled her from the community of German Jewish artists she had become a part of while abroad—Elswit effectively shows how dance scholars can recast narratives of twentieth-century German dance, many of which problematically exclude Gert.

The implications of revising standard historical narratives on dance are particularly pressing for scholars working to close gaps in historical knowledge—especially in East German dance, which arguably remains one of

the largest in German dance studies. In “Moving Against Disappearance: East German Bodies in Contemporary Choreography,” Jens Giersdorf uses a personal-biographical approach as a segue into a larger discussion of dance and historical discourse. Giersdorf combines close readings of Sasha Waltz’s *Allee den Kosmonauten* (1996) and Jo Fabian’s *Pax Germania* (1997) alongside his own memory as an East German of walking across the border from East to West Berlin on November 10, 1989, the day the Berlin Wall fell. Considering representations of East versus West German bodies in work by Waltz and Fabian in light of his own experience of history as a sequence of personally felt (and primarily pedestrian) movements, Giersdorf shows how stage performance in pre- and post-reunification Germany functions as a battleground between memory claims and definitions of historical subjectivity. Giersdorf ultimately launches a cutting and important critique of the internationally celebrated Waltz, whose 1996 work is often cited as an insightful portrayal of the “East German” experience. Limited in her understanding of mobility within the culture of the East, Waltz depicts East German subjects as powerless, desubjectivized agents. Giersdorf argues:

Waltz does not clarify to whom or to what the bodies [of East Germans depicted onstage] surrender their authority and agency. Consequently, social power and agency turn into free-floating concepts that are only temporarily connected to the body in Waltz’s work and are not grounded in historical experiences and structures. Bodies in Waltz’s choreography might react to their surroundings, but they never consciously refuse to participate nor do they create their own social situation. (179)

Like Giersdorf, Marion Kant deploys personal biography to consider dance as a site for the cultural and intellectual legacy of the GDR. In “*Was Bleibt? The Politics of East German Dance*,” Kant combines biography with a critique of contemporary discourse on East German intellectuals to indict the field of

German dance scholarship for refusing to confront its Nazi past. Kant invokes the difficult status that intellectuals of the former East, such as Christa Wolf, occupy to argue against the idea of a *Stunde Null* (Zero Hour) in East German dance: de-Nazification among dancers in East Germany never existed. Presenting a “gallery of biographies” (141), Kant explains how state support for artists such as Mary Wigman and Gert Palucca (both with strong ties to National Socialism) and its rejection of artists such as Jean Weidt and Marianne Vogelsang (committed communists and Nazi opponents) has shaped the current grounds of knowledge for German dance scholarship. Kant’s unrelenting critique invokes Walter Benjamin’s 1940 observation that “the only historian capable of fanning the spark of hope in the past is the one who is firmly convinced that *even the dead* will not be safe from the enemy if he is victorious” (2003, 391). Raised and educated in East Germany, Kant effectively wields a combination of personal ideology and historical scholarship to challenge the hidden politics of inherited knowledge.³ Her work also illustrates the ways in which the legacy of Germany’s division in 1949 and reunification in 1989 influences the field today—in particular, the absorption of many East German institutions (including those related to dance) by the West after the fall of the Berlin Wall.⁴

In “Warfare over Realism: *Tanztheater* in East Germany, 1966–1989,” Franz Anton Cramer likewise underscores how Germany’s divided history continues to affect dance scholarship. Analyzing dances by Tom Schilling in the mid-1960s at the Komischer Oper as a focal point for debates about socialist realist art, Cramer opens up a much-needed dialogue on the status of German dance under state-mandated aesthetics. Pointing to the origins of ideas about ballet realism as a form of propagandized popular entertainment with no intrinsic aesthetic value—in addition to underscoring the increasing disappearance of work by East German choreographers from the repertory of major German dance companies—Cramer shows how problematic attitudes about ballet realism still circulate among contemporary research and performance communities.

The final group of essays in *New German Dance Studies* addresses issues associated with *Konzeptanz* (conceptual dance), a performance

genre characterized by formal and conceptual engagements with disembodied assumptions about movement. Manning and Ruprecht note that the emergence of *Konzeptanz* occurred part and parcel with the turn toward *Kulturwissenschaft*: “Topical questions in dance research cannot be separated from the emergence of conceptual dance, and conceptual dance in turn cannot be separated from the accompanying shift from broadly sociohistorical to broadly philosophical approaches to dance history” (4). *Konzeptanz*, taking its cues from cultural studies, understands dance as an embodied site of knowledge production embedded in a broader picture of culture, history, and language. In general, *Konzeptanz* and work by its practitioners resist definitive claims to truth and fixity. True to its name, *Konzeptanz* emphasizes the primacy of the concept in movement: dance is an exercise in thinking. Understood in this way, *Konzeptanz* is as much a kind of discourse as it is a performance genre.

Because of its close association with the turn toward *Kulturwissenschaft*, as well as its general characterization by Manning and Ruprecht, *Konzeptanz* stands as a symbol for both the current and future direction of German dance studies. Scholars concerned with *Konzeptanz* demonstrate “a particularly acute understanding of aspects that involve going beyond textuality, such as physical presence and performative enactment,” while others, through an attention to the body and corporeality, rethink the role of the archive and historical memory as something dynamic rather than “static, architectonic, quantitative, and encyclopedic” (9). A performance practice that embraces but is not restricted by the study of language (best illustrated by the lecture-demonstration as a choreographic device), *Konzeptanz* serves as a model to unite different discursive practices, as it “represents, in fact, a very heterogeneous body of experimental pieces that share a certain theoretical attitude: they all think about dance within the framework of dance; to do so, they often (but not always) include language” (8–9).

Equally concerned with embodiment, language, and discourse, *Konzeptanz* shows how dance is linked to different cultures of knowledge in society. The possibilities for dance’s meaningful engagement with “diverse realms in the humanities” here is easily apparent; yet this final set of essays makes for the most

difficult reading in the anthology. In many cases, these works confuse, more than clarify, how performance, conceptual or otherwise, contributes both to cultural studies and to a broader culture of knowledge beyond dance.

In “Choreography, Letter, and the Law in William Forsythe,” for example, Gerald Siegmund examines the relationship of choreography, as a socially embedded phenomenon, to legal knowledge, including concepts such as human rights and *habeas corpus*. In this context, Siegmund analyzes William Forsythe and Kendall Thomas’s 2005 work *Human Writes*, in which dancers were tasked to write passages on large pieces of paper from the United Nation’s 1948 *Universal Declaration of Human Rights* with various parts of their bodies (while their other body parts were bound or restricted). Siegmund argues that choreography can be understood as the intersection between definitions of the body and definitions of the law. Invoking writing by Giorgio Agamben, the early history of dance notation in the sixteenth century, and earlier dances by Forsythe (such as his 1992 *Alie/N(a)Ction*), Siegmund notes how *Human Writes* stages a series of “imaginary bodies” through which both audiences and performers can begin to explore the mechanisms of the law that govern our movement, language, and ability to relate to others.

Although Siegmund has clearly identified a productive point of departure to show how dance enriches an understanding of the law (and vice versa), the context that he provides for thinking about Forsythe within the history of choreography is problematic. Siegmund provides a brief summary of the origins of choreography as the written notation of steps and gestures, historically attributed to the 1589 publication of Thoinot Arbeau’s *Orchésographie*, the first dance notational treatise. Drawing a genealogy from Arbeau to Forsythe, Siegmund then notes that “William Forsythe’s choreographic negotiations with the letter and the law have a very long history” (211). He argues, drawing primarily on work by Mark Franko, that Forsythe’s choreography affects a similar kind of subjective agency at play in sixteenth-century definitions of choreography, in which dance was “a means of noting, writing dance movements” that “ties the dancing body to the signs of writing that from now on regulate its movements and tell it what it has to do to be a

‘good dancer’” (209–10). Importantly, what Siegmund does not account for is the shift that occurred in the idea of choreography from Arbeau to Forsythe: a contemporary understanding of choreography as the creative generation of movement, steps, and gestures—as opposed to choreography as the expression of proper bodily comportment and the faithful reproduction of notated steps—did not emerge until the nineteenth century, when ballet began to peel off from opera and pantomime.⁵ How this change is embedded, or rejected, in Forsythe’s vision of “choreography [as] the law of the moving, dancing body” (210) is unexamined. This, in many ways, seems to be the heart of the matter.

Like Turner’s essay, Siegmund’s writing tries to cover too much ground too quickly; the shifts from Forsythe to Agamben to Arbeau back to Forsythe require considerable work by the reader, as well as substantial background knowledge in contemporary dance, dance history, and critical theory. While this itself is not problematic, in reading the essay, it is not clear how the alternation between the different strains of theory, content, and history contribute toward clarifying his fundamental (and ultimately most interesting) point—that *Human Writes* “stages our foundational and precarious (dis)integration into the social fabric,” and thus exposes “the theater and aesthetic sphere not as havens of beauty and eternal truths, but as a contested site exploring possibilities of access to that which we call our reality” (215).⁶

Similarly, other authors writing about *Konzeptanz* spend considerable energy positioning dance within a field of cultural and critical theory, yet the point of such maneuvering is not always clear. For example, Gabriele Klein, in “Toward a Theory of Cultural Translation in Dance,” crafts a description of “cultural translation in dance” from a range of disciplinarily aligned yet unconnected theories, including ethnographies on tango and hip-hop, visions of postcolonial identity, discourses on the role of the translator, deconstructionism, and psychoanalytic ideas of transference. Without contextualizing her use of these theoretical nuggets relative to the broader (and perhaps more crucial) arguments that their respective authors make, Klein’s theoretical patchwork distracts more than deepens her point. Similar to Siegmund’s invocation of Agamben, it is not

evident that Klein needs these outside voices to support her more fundamental (and again, more interesting) claim: that dance facilitates forms of cultural negotiation without forcing expression into problematic dualisms of the “original” versus the “translation.” Because of dance’s status as time-based expression and the subsequent degree of ephemerality inscribed in it, dance as an act of narrative communication fundamentally accounts for shifts and losses of meaning—the preoccupation, to some degree, of all translators. Klein here makes a strong case for the lesson other fields can learn from dance: “Dancing as movement is not something untranslatable because of its physical focus. Instead, relating what is indescribable in dance, or failing to do so, is a key part of the narrative” (256).

New German Dance Studies shows the influence of cultural studies on dance studies in the German-speaking world. Also clear are the points where the study of dance can contribute to the study of a range of topics in the humanities. What is less clear, however, is how well dance scholars are able to articulate their concerns in a way that is open and accessible to scholars with little to no grounding in dance. *New German Dance Studies* shows that there is a vibrant culture of knowledge surrounding dance; what it does not show is how that knowledge can circulate beyond the borders of dance studies. And yet the future of the field depends on it.

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Notes

1. Gay Morris (2009) provides a clear overview of the cultural studies turn among American and British dance scholars—and the role of Manning’s intervention within it.

2. Karl Toepfer (1997) provides an excellent overview of early German dance criticism and scholarship, including those writers employing biographical approaches.

3. Marion Kant (2011) details the role of the personal and political in her work.

4. One prominent example being the field of *Tanzwissenschaft* (dance studies). For further reading, see Jens Giersdorf (2009).

5. Similarly, the idea of “the choreographer” as a figure in the construction of a dance is a product of later history—in this case, the twentieth century.

6. Though what “reality” Siegmund is talking about is also unclear: legal? social? virtual? How, exactly, does choreography performed by a company of highly specialized, technically virtuosic performers generate an experience and/or vision of mobility and restriction intended to speak to a wider population—one presumably more diverse than the cast of the Ballet Frankfurt? What are the implications of understanding choreography as something primarily legal, rather than as artistic or aesthetic?

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Kinesthetic City: Dance and Movement in Chinese Urban Spaces

by SanSan Kwan, 2013. Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 175 pp., 49 figures, notes, bibliography, index. \$99.00 cloth, \$27.95 paper. doi:10.1017/S0149767714000102

SanSan Kwan’s *Kinesthetic City* is a welcome addition to the fields of sinology, dance studies, and urban studies, especially at a time when these areas are being re-examined and even contested. This engaging book draws upon Kwan’s auto-ethnographic experience as a movement practitioner who traveled to various sinophone