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Author post-print (accepted) deposited by Coventry University's Repository

Original citation & hyperlink:

Foellmer, S 2018, 'Dynamics or Solidifications? Questions on Form(ations) in Contemporary Dance' *Performance Research: A Journal of the Performing Arts*, vol. 23, no. 4-5, pp. 318 – 323.

<https://dx.doi.org/10.1080/13528165.2018.1518575>

DOI 10.1080/13528165.2018.1518575

ISSN 1352-8165

ESSN 1469-9990

Publisher: Taylor and Francis

This is an Accepted Manuscript of an article published by Taylor & Francis in Performance Research: A Journal of the Performing Arts on 29/10/18], available online: <http://www.tandfonline.com/10.1080/13528165.2018.1518575>

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Dynamics or Solidifications?

Questions on Form(ations) in Contemporary Dance

Susanne Foellmer

Sadler's Wells, 15 November 2017: it is the first time that Berlin/Brussels-based choreographer Meg Stuart is presenting a group piece in London, and at this prestigious dance location. Until Our Hearts Stop is a two-hour show that plays with illusionary tools of theatre, chases through contemporary dance practices and at times quotes from performance art history, sliding along the edges of corporeal and intimate borders that are crossed in public. Magical tricks, deformed masquerades, dancers performing a kind of ragged approach in half and fully naked contact improvisation, a performer who pulls a string out of her vagina in a seeming allusion to Carolee Schneeman's famous performance Interior Scroll (1975): it is sometimes a revue, sometimes exuberant ritual, sometimes a wonky magic show, and so it seems impossible to pin down the genre that this production belongs to. Nevertheless, Stuart is known as a well-established choreographer who has been producing cutting-edge performances in the field of contemporary dance since the beginning of the 1990s. Though critics do not always highly praise her productions, it is unquestioned that her oeuvre -- which has received many prizes -- generated some of the key dance pieces in the last three decades.

However, when reading the critiques after the Sadler's Wells performance, there seems to be a certain reluctance to fully acknowledge Stuart's performance as one of the many variations contemporary dance currently has to offer. In The Times, Donald Hutera characterizes the piece as a kind of party at which conventional constraints are transcended. Without actually pushing the production outside the realm of dance, he still inserts a genre limitation into his review: 'In terms of dance we had to settle for passages of rudimentary and cryptic group movement' (Hutera 2017). According to Hutera, there was only a small part of the performance that could have been labelled dance, without saying in which category to put the 'rest' of the piece. In The Guardian, Luke Jennings compares Stuart's work to that of Pina Bausch, especially regarding the dancers'/performers' play with and around intimacy. When referring to Bausch as a role model for this kind of stage work, Stuart's piece does not come off well: too long, too boring -- and 'so much conceptual dance ... for

all its apparent unconstraint, it's impelled by a kind of puritanism' (Jennings 2017). Moreover, when it comes to categorizing the movement as such it seems that it fails to be placed in the field of dance: The title of Jennings' review already signifies the performance as 'competitive gymnastics' (2017).

This is not to say that one is not allowed to dislike Meg Stuart's work or performances by other protagonists in the field of contemporary dance. One can be bored by a certain bareness of movement, by lengthiness, by the way a piece appeals to one's senses, intellect, aesthetic expectations and preferences. What I would like to roughly outline and canvas in this example is the question of how we conceive of (Western) dance in contemporary times.

On Labels

Interestingly, the polarization of dance and 'concept' -- or 'as' concept -- is one that has been used frequently. It is a denotation that still divides opinions and that seems an important attribute when evaluating Stuart's piece as Jennings does. However, the notion of 'concept dance' is often used to disqualify a piece as (not) being dance or to link it to something that, even though it is contemporary, is not what one wants to see when considering dance. Despite the term alluding to visual arts in the 1960s and their break with expression and signification (Goldberg 2001: 152--3), and to the commitment of Judson Church dancers and choreographers within this field (Banes 1987: 45), the notion received a negative, invective connotation in the realm of dance from the beginning. It was actually introduced by a French journalist when judging upcoming dance forms in the 1990s and distinguishing them from productions in which the protagonists were 'still' dancing (Siegmund 2005: 42) and has been perpetuated ever since [note]1.

When evaluating the Berlin dance festival Tanz im August (Dance in August) -- one of the key festivals for contemporary dance in Europe -- German dance critic Wiebke Hüster, for example, judges the whole event very harshly. Accusing the Berlin independent dance scene of merely sticking to weak and 'boring' concepts instead of dancing, and then putting too much emphasis on processes instead of products, she even deprives its protagonists of being dancers: 'Let's call them "people who go on stage", because they aren't dancers; they're just people who think it's hip to hang out

on stage' (Hüster 2011). Meg Stuart is in the focus of her critique as well: Hüster simply does not believe her recently stressed return to movement: 'And now even the expert in broken relationships and shaking fantasies of destruction, bad old Meg Stuart, is now supposedly placing "a focus on movement as the primary motor"' (2011).

Also, Jennings' (dis)qualification of Stuart's piece as 'gymnastics' belongs to a binary that had already appeared on the eve of modern dance and German dance. Profiting greatly from her experience with Émile Jaques-Dalcroze, especially in using the body as an expressive instrument (Wigman 1986a: 51), Mary Wigman is keen to separate dance from gymnastics, denoting the latter explicitly as not being dance. When talking about the young dancers she is dealing with, Wigman states:

Many of them haven't even completed their gymnastics training when they come to dance; they don't even have access to their body in the sense of a dance instrument. And it is far more a blamage for the directors when they employ dancers who don't have the necessary stage experience. (Wigman 1986b: 75)

Surely, the idea of the body as an instrument has undergone justified criticism since then. However, the negative touch of the term 'gymnastics' still seems to linger on, apparently because gymnastics is deficient in comparison to dance for it lacks the body's ability to transform movement into an artistically meaningful expression, or so it seems when Wigman talks about it.

Concepts, processes, too much gymnastics, too little dance -- what exactly is it then that would attribute movements on stage to dance? What is its (contemporary) form, what are the criteria, who measures how far movements have to go to qualify as 'dance'? And who decides? Of course, I won't be able to answer these questions within the scope of this essay. However, I would like to open some windows for further discussion.

On Form(s) and Formations

Wigman often talks about the ability to transform movements into dance, about the competence to shape them (Formgebung) when composing a piece, favouring both simplicity and clarity of form (Wigman 1986c: 10). Again, this is not the place to fully unfold the implications of dance and form from modern dance until today. However, the notion of form seems to be an interesting trigger to start thinking about the attributes that are assigned to various contemporary dance productions.

Returning to Sadler's Wells and the critics' dislike of Stuart's piece, one could ask what is usually expected from this dance venue. When one browses through reviews of various productions that have been presented on location, those by Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui and Akram Khan are immediately visible. Cherkaoui, merging various dance styles such as flamenco and breakdance in his production Fractus V (2014), seems to stand out as a dancer because of his 'soft fluid body', and as a choreographer due to his capacity to be 'constant[ly] swapping between forms', as in Judith Mackrell's critique (Mackrell 2016a). Debra Craine confirms this view:

Despite the different rhythms and dynamics of each style -- showcased and sublimated in the versatile choreography -- there is a fluid logic to the whole, which resonates most deeply when all the movement languages merge into a single, sensuous whole. (Craine 2016a)

While the mix of styles and genres in Stuart's Until Our Hearts Stop is rather deprecated as being a kind of chaotic and deregulated 'party' (Hutera 2017), Cherkaoui on the contrary is especially praised for mixing various dance moves, seemingly because of the fluidity and effortlessness with which they are mastered. The same holds true for Akram Khan. Reviewing his now famous, still touring piece Kaash (2002), which fuses Indian Kathak with contemporary dance, Judith Mackrell acknowledges the 'whiplash speeds and silken arms, the percussive richness of bare feet against the floor' (Mackrell 2016b). Likewise, Debra Craine admires the 'circular flow and angular thrust, speed and stillness' with which the dancers move within the choreography (Craine 2016b). Interestingly, the fact that Khan does not give into the 'conceptualism' of contemporary dance (any more) seems to qualify his work as an artfully mature one -- or so Jennings sees it when reviewing his piece Desh (2011)

presented at the Curve theatre in Leicester: 'Khan appears to have turned away from an increasingly arid postmodernism and trusted to his own instincts' (Jennings 2011).

Without attempting to generalize the critiques of three singular dance productions, a tendency seems to become visible that prefers dance that serves a certain virtuosity, abundance and spatiality of movement on stage. Comparing the reconstruction of Lucinda Childs' work Dance (1979/2009) to the other disapproved productions of Tanz im August, Hüster appreciates Childs' unique combination of dance and music, and the ways she places movement phrases on stage according to a 'sophisticated' dramaturgy (Hüster 2011). Especially the question of space, in terms of its literal size as well as its cultural availability regarding venues for dance, recently led to debates on the so-called 'grand form' (große Form) in dance, for example in Berlin.[{note}]² Form in this case often seems to signify the ability to perform more than solos or duets, to be able to work in 'big' spaces with large-scale productions that enable an escape from the economic scarcity that is one of the reasons why contemporary dance often deals with one to five dancers on stage -- the funds are simply lacking for more.

From an aesthetic perspective, form has always been a paramount issue in the arts. Without summarizing vast debates, I would like to refer to the editorial in Performance Research's On Form/Yet to Come. In it, Ric Allsopp reminds us in particular of postmodernism's approaches of refraining from the idea of form as a fixed and stable, product-like entity. Consequently, he highlights art's orientation towards processuality, relationality and encounter, as it is theoretically grounded by Nicolas Bourriaud: Especially the performing arts focus on a 'relational view of performance as a shared moment of becoming' (Allsopp 2005: 1). However, the 'traditional' idea of form itself is not entirely bound to its rigid understanding as a mere vessel of art's contents. The first sentence of the entry on 'form' in the German Encyclopedia of Aesthetics (Lexikon der Ästhetik) already states that form is 'the exterior side of an artwork: its structure, the totality of its elements and their relationship to one another' (Henckmann and Lotter 1992: 63). Even though the authors still claim an inner--outer relation of contents and form (63), they hint at a concept of form that is always already a relational one that not only refers to the

inner organization of an artwork but also to its connections to other contexts such as the so-called life-world (64).

Further alluding to Lucy Lippard's observation of the 'emptying of form' in the visual arts (Allsopp 2005: 3), Allsopp describes the dynamization of form in contemporary (performance and dance) art up to 'its focus on the intensities and flows of energy' (2) instead of 'obeying' to certain rigid formative principles. However, the importance of something being shown in public, in front of audiences or beholders, still seems to remain when discussing the ways in which art presents itself. Visibility is eminently an issue that can hardly be neglected when 'watching' dance^{[note]3} and the discourse of representation that goes along with it. Without delving into this debate and its theoretical basis regarding the problems of the spectacle in an image-driven society, I would like to briefly pass on an anecdote. A few years ago I was talking to Lina Lindheimer, one of Berlin's young upcoming choreographers at the time. Having seen one of her short pieces, I briefly met her after the show, and soon we were involved in musings about the presentability and 'doability' of contemporary dance today. Lindheimer was a little bit disillusioned when she argued that it was hard to show anything on a (Berlin) dance stage at the time, as there seemed to be too many unspoken taboos: a taboo on narration, on pathos, on emotions, on illustration, on representation generally. So, 'what is left to show on stage?' was her laconic and simultaneously quizzical implication.

Specifically dance from Germany, and namely Berlin, as well as France has gained a certain fame in trying to avoid recognizable corporeal or choreographic movement patterns, investing in the examination of the unfinished and fluid, more dynamic conceptions of the body that intend not to end at the skin as a border (Le Roy 2003: 78). Various motives generated these experiments, of which I only want to mention a few, such as Meg Stuart's dance quartet No Longer Readymade (1993). Inspired by Francis Bacon's paintings and their distortions of corporeal shapes, in particular the head, the piece features one of the key solos in contemporary dance: Benoît Lachambre's constantly shaking body, his head being thrown from side to side, thus causing coalescing sensations when trying to visually 'grasp' especially his face's contours.^{[note]4} Stuart questions the body's unity and develops a modus of fragmentation in motion. However, this is not to say that dance since the 1990s has

not already been working with certain patterns in terms of the performance of fluidity and incompleteness. Though at its premiere it was regarded as being indescribable, as 'formless' (Husemann 2002: 38), Xavier Le Roy's production Self unfinished (1998) now seems to almost serve as a model for how to dynamize bodies' borders. Krassimira Kruschkova for instance talks about Le Roy's piece as well as Meg Stuart's aesthetics of fragmentation in terms of 'examples [that] already become "classics"' (Kruschkova 2010: n.p.). And indeed, the paradox of body patterns of metamorphosis are detectable in most recent dance productions, such as Berlin choreographer Isabelle Schäd's (and Laurent Goldring's) productions Unturtled (2009--13) or Pieces and Elements (2016).

[{figure1}]

One of the theoretical references for the processual in dance, the nomadic and the physically transgressive are Gilles Deleuze's and Félix Guattari's reflections in A Thousand Plateaus (1987). Laurence Louppe connects examples from performances in contemporary dance, such as Alain Buffard's and other dancers' and choreographers' engagement with heterogeneous or dislocated bodies, to the idea of the body without organs -- in a maybe somewhat too literal sense (Louppe 2007: 51--2). André Lepecki refers to both authors when, for example, observing the intrusion and confrontation with the monstrous in dance (Lepecki 2016: 85). However, Deleuze and Guattari themselves do not fully celebrate the idea of the ungraspable, the floating of bodies and significations, and the idea of constant de-territorializations. Unfolding the idea of the rhizome as a counter-model to hierarchical, vertical orders, they nevertheless remark that even proliferating foldings and unfoldings can lead to certain 'knots' (Deleuze and Guattari 1987: 2) and sedimentations of meaning. Dealing with the question of interpretation and possible alternatives, they remark: 'A highly stratified semiotic is difficult to get away from. Even a presignifying, or counter-signifying, semiotic, even an asignifying diagram, harbors knots of coincidence just waiting to form virtual centers of signifiace and points of subjectification' (138).

On one hand, this short dip into the Deleuze-Guattarinarian depths shows that even the most ambitious nomadologic and dynamized project has to deal with questions of

what happens if there is a hold-up in the constant flow of bodies and meanings -- and it is not surprising that one can already speak of certain procedures, patterns and even inventories of the incomplete, the fragmented and unfinished in contemporary dance (see Foellmer 2009). On the other hand, the idea that especially contemporary dance gets rid of formative fixations by investing in dynamizations and energetic intensities while at the same time apparently not being able to avoid certain attributions over time leads us back, again, to the disposition of form as such. As form always already appears in relational constellations, not only since Bourriaud, one could ask whether the concept of form actually also conceives of an internal dynamism that would oppose the traditional view on form as something rigid and stable. In her reflections on Derrida and his preference of the trace (instead of form), Catherine Malabou leverages the thinking of form by claiming that the generation, stabilization and dissolution of form are already united in the idea of form as such:

The threefold game of form -- the giving, accepting and extinguishing of form -- does not refer to three separate operations in which it is first about the imposing of form on a material, then about the definition of the imprinted material and finally the unjustified and incomprehensible terrorist act of completely extinguishing the form. Basically, it is all just about a single movement that connects the creation and destruction of form, and this movement is just one of regeneration of the inexhaustible or unlimited. (2013: 36--7)

In short, one could say that protagonists of contemporary dance contribute to such a transgressive understanding of form in terms of processual and ongoing (de)formations, not so much neglecting the concept as such but rather reformulating the perspective on what form in dance could be conceived of today.

Which Forms? Open Questions

Returning to the beginning, and to Meg Stuart's Until Our Hearts Stop, however, one could ask if we are talking about form at all if critics claim that something is not dance, or rather gymnastics. The question of form here seems to address certain aesthetic expectations that are bound to a particular venue, in this case Sadler's

Wells. An online comment on Hutera's review states that the author was even too mild when judging the performance: 'There was no dance, no discernible talent. This is the worst thing I've seen at Sadler's Wells by a country mile' (Kimber 2017). But then what exactly should (contemporary) dance look like in order to fit into a venue like Sadler's Wells? Would it be many dancers on stage moving fluently in a rhythmically organized sense? Well, one could say that Stuart's piece was certainly organized by rhythmical arrangements of movements, even dancing to a synchronous choreography in the end. Or is it about a particular virtuosity with which the dance movements are executed? But then, what kind of criteria apply to virtuosity? Is the near perfectly performed clumsiness of movements in the pseudo-contact improvisation in the beginning of Stuart's piece, the controlled command of being uncoordinated in a group of dancers dependent on each other, not proof of a certain virtuosic mastery? Or is virtuosity instead connected to the idea of effortless movement and a certain fluidity in the way Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui and Akram Khan have presented it in their performances at Sadler's Wells? Is this a 'form' of virtuosity that is not offered when watching a Stuart dance piece? [note]5

But then, if we label something as being (contemporary) dance, what exactly would delineate its anticipated form on stage? What are its characteristics? And what does a dance production have to look like in order to be benevolently approved of by a larger audience? What would be its form?

Notes

1 On the discourse of non-representation in contemporary dance and the idea of the 'not' discussed by various (German speaking) dance scholars accordingly see Schellow (2016: 116--201).

2 The question of the 'grand form' has been discussed recently at various events, for example during the podium discussion 'The Grand Form in Dance and Music Theatre', which compared the diverging conditions and requirements of dance and music theatre (with Cristina Ciupke, Susanne Foellmer, Jutta Hell (Rubato), Constanza Macras, Oliver Proske (Nico & the Navigators) and Sven Holm (NOVOFLOT), Zweiter Branchentreff der freien darstellenden Künste, Ballhaus Ost, Berlin, 25 October 2014).

3 Even though performances like Jefta van Dinter's Grind (2012) explicitly play with the idea of invisibility, leaving the moving body in an almost complete blackness during the course of the entire piece and thus concentrating on sounds and atmosphere.

4 It is interesting that such a 'technique of blurring', which already belongs to the canon of fine arts, still at times seems to cause receptive resistance when such movements appear in dance.

5 On virtuosity and/as imperfection in German contemporary theatre (Frank Castorf, Christoph Marthaler, René Pollesch) see Brandl-Risi (2007).

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Caption

Figure 1. Isabelle Schad: Pieces and Elements, Berlin, 2016. Photo: Isabelle Schad.