

Backstage. Spaces, (Hi)Stories of tanzhaus nrw

A research project with students of the Centre for Contemporary Dance in Cologne

By Pirkko Husemann



The venue of the Dance Congress 2013 was tanzhaus nrw. It was founded in January 1978 under the name "Die Werkstatt für Tanz, Theater, Malen, Werken und Gestalten e.V.", which itself emerged from a collective that had existed since 1973. At the time of the Congress in June 2013, tanzhaus nrw faced a historical, institutional caesura, since Bertram Müller, the cofounder of the association and later its artistic and managing director was about to leave tanzhaus nrw after 35 years. Students of the Centre for Contemporary Dance (ZZT) of the Hochschule für Musik und Tanz took this occasion to deal with the theme of dance institutions based on the example of the tanzhaus nrw.

Spaces and Stories

The focus of the research project was on the spaces of tanzhaus nrw (housed in a former tramway depot since 1998) and on the longstanding staff members of the institution (teachers of the "academy", i.e., the extensive course and workshop programme, festival curators, in-house and stage technicians, employees in the areas of the training institute, press and public relations, artistic direction etc.). Based on a theoretical seminar that dealt with sociological and art-historical concepts of institutions and institution-critical artists' initiatives in the fine and performing arts since the 1960s, the students developed two formats to approach the field: 1) an audio-walk for the Congress participants conceived by Martin Sonderkamp and Katarina Kleinschmidt (both ZZT) that led through the basement rooms of tanzhaus nrw and 2) a series of interviews with six tanzhaus staff members¹ that were conducted live under my direction and could be listened to by Congress participants via headphones and watched through a studio window.² The starting point that both formats shared was the interest in what is "invisible" in the institution, i.e., the spaces of the building that are unused or inaccessible to the public as well as the personal memories and stories that are usually not included in the official history of an institution.³

The interest in what is "invisible" was not motivated by wanting to reveal internal affairs or deficiencies, but by the wish to make the institution as such visible, meaning those facilities that are otherwise in the background and enable the programme. For what will cling to the audience's mind of 35 years of tanzhaus nrw are mainly the events such as courses and workshops, performances, festivals, parties etc., as well as perhaps one review or the other and a publically led debate on the future of the institution. According to the dramaturge Henrike Kollmar, the staff members are so concentrated on daily operations that a look back on their programme and experiences is hardly possible – not to speak of a pause for reflection. For this reason, the 'Backstage' project started with the architecture and the staff to show that institutions are not static and a given, but must always also be seen as the result of a process and as dynamic structures.

¹ Partners of the interviews that lasted 25 minutes each were the staff members Bertram Müller, Angela Yucko, Dorothee Schackow as well as the freelancers Jost Budde, Takao Baba and Carlo Melis.

² This setting should be mentioned, since it allowed us to establish an at once private and public space for concentrated discussions amidst the hustle and bustle of the Dance Congress.

³ We therefore thank everyone who enabled or granted us a look into the backstage area of tanzhaus nrw – especially Henrike Kollmar, who made contact to the different departments and persons in charge.

The Dance Congress as Context

The theme of the Dance Congress, 'Bewegungen Übersetzen – Performing Translations' served as a further orientation, particularly in preparing the series of interviews. The fact that the tanzhaus nrw grasps itself as a site of cultural diversity and social inclusion prompted us to focus on the themes of transculturality and cultural work with a broad public in dance. The interview partners were asked whether and to what extent they have committed themselves to the representation of different cultures, the mixture of regional dance styles and the mediation to different generations and social milieus in the frame of their activities at tanzhaus nrw.⁴ This focus connected 'Backstage' with other events of the Dance Congress in the subject area of 'Negotiating Conditions': for example, the lecture of the cultural scholar Janet O'Shea on the marketing of national (in this case, Indian) identity at international dance festivals or also the global modes of production of African choreographers which were critically examined by Sabine Sörgel against the background of postcolonial and capitalist structures. The guiding questions of O'Shea and Sörgel were also relevant to our approach to tanzhaus nrw: Does dance from "Africa" or "Asia" merely serve a marketing and financing strategy here? Or are the snares in dealing with non-European dance and movement cultures reflected upon? And is this awareness also mirrored on the levels of the programme, public relations and the staff?

Academy and Stage Belong Together

The results of our guideline interviews (which are not representative due to the low number) can be summed up as follows: First of all, the evolutionary and unplanned process of institutionalisation must be mentioned, since tanzhaus nrw emerged from the "grassroots initiative" of the workshop (Bertram Müller) and from the sphere of "socio-culture" (Angela Vucko). In the beginning, artists were invited to hold dance workshops and courses for non-professionals and in the same context to show performances, something which gradually generated an audience beyond the course participants. From the onset, training financed itself and until today (with up to 3,000 course participants per week) enables a prorated cross-financing of the stage programme through the revenues of the academy. After the stage programme gained importance and visibility through the move to tanzhaus nrw, this led to a situation Angela Vucko in regard to her responsibility for press and public relations described in a preliminary talk before the interview as a "dogma": academy and stage belong together, even if they were originally set up differently in terms of finance and content, and are still largely separated today in terms of staff (due to the corresponding division of labour) and space (due to the architectural structure of the building). In face of the imminent change of the director, staff members are therefore worried that this constellation will be called into question in the future and could be altered to the disadvantage of the academy.

Identification and Curiosity

We discovered a great satisfaction of the staff members and a corresponding strong identification with the institution of tanzhaus nrw. Due to the fact that most have been with the tanzhaus nrw for many years, they do not regard the institution as a given, but have partially created it themselves. In addition to Bertram Müller, some staff members including Dorothee Schackow, director of tanzhaus academy and of the festival 'Tänze der Welt', have been working there since the early 1980s. Others joined in when tanzhaus nrw was opened in 1998 or a bit later like the dancer, tango teacher and festival curator Jost Budde and Angela Vucko. Asked how they were professionally and personally shaped by tanzhaus nrw, many stated "multiculturalism" and the thus necessitated relativizing of a Eurocentric perspective, as well as the special challenge posed by working with "non-professionals". Both features are probably to a great extent the result of the professional back-

⁴ The guidelines included four sets of questions that varied slightly depending on the interview partner: 1) "Do you have practical experiences in dance?" (direction team) or "What is your favourite space in tanzhaus nrw and why?" (academy teachers) 2.1) "Please tell us when and how you came to tanzhaus nrw and what your main focus has been since then." 2.2) "In what respect have you shaped tanzhaus nrw, and how has tanzhaus nrw shaped you?" 3.1) "In what way are you interested in or committed to cultural diversity in the frame of your work?" 3.2) "In what way are you interested in or committed to social inclusion in the frame of your work?" 4) "What are your worries and wishes in face of the upcoming change of the director at tanzhaus nrw?"

ground of the director and the executive staff members. Both Bertram Müller (a trained theologian and philosopher, former teacher and practicing psychotherapist) and Dorothee Schackow (who as an education researcher comes from the field of adult education) stress that their work follows three maxims: curiosity about the new, love for cultural diversity and the interest in individual artist personalities.⁵ In the interview, Müller surprisingly formulates the latter as follows: “Contemporary dance combines creator and creature to the individual, self-responsible creator on the stage.” What is meant by this is that in the figure of the dance choreographer, author and body, or artist and medium, coincide in one person, a concept of subjectivity that was able to establish itself only in the most recent history of dance.

Multiculturality or Transculturality?

When further researching into “cultural diversity” at tanzhaus nrw, contradictions emerge. Against the background of a congress that on a theoretical and practical level delves into dynamic concepts of culture such as hybridisation, processuality and alterability (instead of homogeneity, self-containment and continuity), one notices that the self-understanding of tanzhaus nrw still seems to be characterised by the outdated concept of multiculturalism. In the conversation with Bertram Müller, for instance, formulations such as “exotic”, “outlandish culture” or “traditional African dance” appear, giving the impression as if the socio-political spirit of the early 1980s still prevailed in the dance studios on Erkenrather Straße. Transculturality is indeed long being practiced (both in the academy and on the stage) – even if the staff members do not agree on which area the “fusion” is more strongly represented. Cooperation projects between hip-hop and tango dancers (Jost Budde and Takao Baba) take place as do “Afro-Latin Weeks” or festivals dedicated to “Oriental dance from the Balkans to India” (Müller). The programme also reflects on the difference between “multi” (the coexistence of cultures) and “trans” (the mingling of cultures). As early as in 2002, there was a festival titled “Global Dance 2002 – Aesthetics of Diversity” at tanzhaus nrw, including a conference at which in the light of a globalised dance market a “Diversity of Aesthetics” was demanded. Asked about the discrepancy between a multicultural self-understanding and a transcultural programme, Müller points out that at tanzhaus nrw there is a de facto coexistence of dance “monocultures” and “transcultural aesthetics”. For example, classical ballet or African dance are taught “in the pure form”, and artists such as Koffi Kôkô from Benin are supported, who other European promoters deem “too traditional”. But at the same time, productions by choreographers such as Olga Pona from Russia or Akram Khan from Great Britain are presented that have emerged from a “lived experience” of transculturality. Therefore, a logic of “either/or” does not apply when analysing the concept of culture at the tanzhaus nrw.

Interculturality and Participation

What appears exemplary is Mark Terkessidis’ demand for a “radically intercultural opening” through opportunities of equal participation.⁶ “Around 65 teachers from 40 countries” (Kollmar) work at the academy, of whom close to half do not possess a European passport, and also in the direction, administration and technical department ca. 25% have a migrant background.⁷ As Dorothee Schackow points out, some teachers function as consultants for the stage programme, while others such as Carlo Melis (contemporary dance) wish for more cooperation between academy and stage – especially in regard to contemporary dance. For not only regional but also many international artists from Europe, Asia, Africa etc. perform at tanzhaus nrw, whose productions, according to Melis, have only little to do with the academy programme and the real lives of the teachers. A closer cooperation between the two areas would require two things: a stronger commitment on the side of the teachers

⁵ When accepting this text, the interview partners Müller and Schackow stressed at this point that the passage insinuates a proximity to socio-pedagogical or even confessional work as well as an adherence of tanzhaus nrw’s to the “community work” of the early days. To refute this impression, they emphasised that tanzhaus nrw mediates art through artists (not pedagogues) and thus basically even advocates an “anti-socio-culture” (Müller).

⁶ Merk Terkessidis, *Interkultur*, Suhrkamp: Frankfurt/Main 2001.

⁷ The tanzhaus nrw has around 40 employees and additionally collaborates with around 15 to 20 freelancers.

and the willingness of the artistic direction to take up the teachers' content-related suggestions. In Melis' opinion, it would suggest itself to take the biographical and cultural backgrounds of the teachers as an occasion to consider new themes or international networks.

Perspectives

This will apparently be one of the main tasks of the new director: To further intertwine academy and stage by obliging visiting artists to hold courses and workshops and, conversely, to deal with the "lived experiences" of the existing staff members and make them productive for the stage programme. At any rate, the replacement of the director after 35 years will offer staff members the opportunity to reinterpret the institution – a process that the social philosopher Rahel Jaeggi, in her considerations on a normative concept of (good) institutions that do not detach themselves from the interests of the social actors, describes as "appropriative re-actualisation": "A [...] vibrant institution does not consist in blindly following rules and routines, but in its appropriative re-actualisation, and one could regard it as a characteristic of institutional maintenance that it never only reproduces itself, but is time and again in need of a new, appropriating interpretation and re-actualising affirmation."⁸ The opportunities for such a step are good, since the remaining staff members of tanzhaus nrw already supported quite a few reorientations in the past. Moreover, the staff members are highly motivated and ready for change. It can be presumed that the structure of academy and stage as well as of "monoculture" and "transculture" will be set in motion under the new direction. Whether the reinterpretation of tanzhaus nrw will also lead to a differentiated debate on theoretical concepts of social diversity and participation and whether this will be integrated in the programme of the future director remains to be seen.

⁸ Rahel Jaeggi, Was ist eine (gute) Institution?, in: Rainer Forst et al. (eds.), Sozialphilosophie und Kritik, Suhrkamp: Frankfurt/Main 2009, p. 543.