

Critical Age Studies in Dance or Dancing Aging

By Katherine Mezur



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Introduction

One of the most exciting areas of dance studies at the Tanzkongress was the Age and Aging studies presentations and performances. Age studies ranged across the full spectrum of approaches, media and types of presentation. From theory, history, and transnational presentations, to the practice as research performance, to roundtables with experts on elder dance, and dance health, to exciting conversations between all ages of dancers/choreographers/scholars: the range and interest in dance age studies was diverse and provocative. There is a groundswell of practice/research by older dancers and choreographers, who are determined and committed to dancing through one's lifetime and changing the present Euro-American prescriptions for the ideal dance bodies and virtuosic technique. The differences between Asian and other traditional forms of dance and "Western" modern and contemporary dance was also part of the critical conversation from the first lecture by Nanako Nakajima, 'The Cultural Politics of Age in Euro-American and Japanese Dance'.

There was a sense that in every performance or presentation that the entire field of dance is just getting started on the possibilities and critical agency that lies in age studies.

The last roundtable, 'Dance in the Second Half of Life', opened up so many areas of dance age studies that when the time for the panel was over, they could not end the questions and conversations. Every dance-related form faces aging and needs to take what Susanne Martin suggests (while she dances): "... a critical position towards the imperative of youthfulness."

Certainly the very energized conversations and lively questions by the participants and continued conversations beyond the presentations, indicate the centrality and importance of age studies in every area of dance. Over and over again, it was emphasized that today dancers are still forced to "retire" in their "thirties" and the peak time of dancing has become younger and more athletic, even gymnastic, and physically demanding techniques have shortened the dance life of a dancer, no matter how well and healthfully trained. We will come back to this again and again: How social change and aesthetic change, and a radical change in the dance world's view of bodies, techniques, and aesthetics need to radically evolve to catch up with the dancing across the spectrum of age. In the contemporary dance world, the young dancing body is "Olympic" in skills and super-body star quality. The pre-conditions of physical shape and visual (stereotyped) features are only the beginning requirements for the super-dancer. In contemporary dance this has leaked globally into the dance market. There is a rampant, almost a youth/age "racism" and prejudice by audience, performers and producers against the aging body. Of course there are exceptions, led by inclusive companies such as Candoco and exceptional and famous companies like Pina Bausch's Tanztheater Wuppertal, or sometimes a famous work is re-performed by the "original" (now older) cast, as in some of Sasha Waltz's works. In the US, some forms of choreography are such that they are inclusive of any age and ability body, such as Deborah Hay's Solo Performance 'Commissioning Project' (ended in 2012). New York City has Eiko and Koma, who will continue to perform beyond their 60s. But, mainstream contemporary dance and contemporary ballet companies that are in residence, independent, underground or "national" by and large are comprised of

young dancers. It may be that audiences need to be shown a broader spectrum of dancers by presenters, curators, and producers. Perhaps too, older performers, if supported by more grants and employment, might also be more daring. Certainly, everyone is implicated in some way in our present dilemma concerning the aging dancer and critical dance age studies. The Tanzkongress provided many forums for all these levels of debate and desire.

Perhaps I need to begin at the ending of the Tanzkongress 2013, when Nanako Nakajima, who had given one of the major presentations on aging in the congress, stood up and re-affirmed that one of the major issues at the conference was that aging includes everyone and that aging is not something for "old" people, but includes everyone. The applause burst forth from everyone in the large hall: an affirmation of how much aging matters to every dancer and every body.

The Tanzkongress was alive with aging bodies. From the first talk by Nanako Nakajima to Susanne Martin's dance lecture performance, to panels and discussions on aging and medicine and elder dance, age, aging, older dancer, choreographing age were part of the between conversations that kept rising up in conversations. These "interrupted" conversations brought up again and again how much dance needs to change its focus on a certain, set corporeality that begins with "youthfulness," where the body is perfect, toned, and rebounds even after injury. The virtuosic youthful body can withstand and even take pleasure in all kinds of physical strain and pain. The visual tricks of these ideal bodies are phenomenal but also boring and tiring, when they are deployed over and over again, they reveal their own systems and lack of analysis.

Like the format of discovering aging at the congress I will go through the different formats that sought to "look differently" through the lens of aging, and especially the aging dancer and choreographer. Following that I will recall the between sessions conversations that were fiercely generated by the contents of the aging sessions and by different dance artists/scholars who feel very strongly that it is time for a sea change in dance aesthetics, foundations, and divisive camps of ballet, traditional dance, and contemporary dance. It is important to note, that age studies, like "gender studies" when it started in the late 1980s and came along with feminist studies, is not "popular" because it disturbs many set ideas of dance in a large and diverse performance community. While there is a charged interest in age studies, there is also a sense of wanting to avoid these frontiers in dance and among dancers.

The Aging Body in Dance: The Cultural Politics of Age in Euro-American and Japanese Dance

Nanako Nakajima

Nanako Nakajima's lecture, 'The Aging Body in Dance: The Cultural Politics of Age in Euro-American and Japanese Dance' not only opened up the age topic but brilliantly insisted that age is inclusive of all sentient and insentient beings. In her processual examination, Nakajima moved from her own experience and her teachers of Nihon Buyo, or Kabuki dance, where age of the dancer may vary from youth to dancers in their 90s and above. The elder dancer is often the most revered, but also the dance roles, may dictate certain aged bodies. Her example of how a youthful kabuki role, which must be danced by someone very old or quite young, unravels the easy age and appearance paradigm to which much of Western dance adheres. She also spoke of Ohno Kazuo's dances in his wheelchair and when he was quite ill, emphasizing how dance keeps changing the body as well as the body changing the dance. Nakajima also complicated the stereotyped youthful dancer image with the critical theory of a Japanese dance critic, the "child-body" of the Japanese dancer. This critique seems to relegate the dancer to a state of immaturity and inability to take responsibility, a kind of escapist model of a dancing body/person. But Nakajima uses this child-body theory to re-examine the more experimental dances by women choreographers who use this almost child-likeness to explore a de-control of current models of contemporary dance and its choreographic rules. Nakajima kept us all asking more questions and wanting to do more research, especially comparative research across cultures across "ages".

The Generation Project: Jess meets Angus

Silke Z., Jess Curtis, Angus Balbernie

In the line of age-related presentations and performances, Silke Z. presented one of her choreographic projects, 'The Generation Project: Jess meets Angus'. This was performed by two men, an American Jess Curtis and a Scotsman, Angus Balbernie, both of whom are moving into their 50s. They have a dance conversation, a danced movement theatre, a movement dialogue. They move and they talk about themselves, especially their bodies, which at first are like pieces of history and we hear stories of childhood and injuries and ways that ordinary life both supports and hinders their dancing bodies. They both move beautifully and oddly in the context of their stories, which makes their moves funny and heartwarming, but also serious because both are performers and their bodies are their livelihoods. There is something about that edge of the older body facing its further deterioration that starts so young: when Curtis' well-meaning mother pulls his arm out of its socket, when he is very young. Between their stories are challenges they give to each other to move different ways, which brings out their unique bodies and trainings and limits. They both challenge and avoid limits of the bodies that have changed through time, aged. Limits are the spoken and then silenced problems of aging or being in this state of moving from youth to the aging body. Which injuries changed your life? What happened? What can you do now differently from that youthful body? are underlying and unstated questions. The two performers keep up a repartee of snips and jokes and prods between each other, which is delightful and sometimes sad. That edge of bitter sweetness comes from the wonderful ways they mimic each other and then abruptly pull away to establish their own territory. The choreography is a like a series of games, kept light and only slightly shadowed by the deeper questions of aging, where limitations may throttle one's physical range, where limits become painful, but these two press on the edge of time and endurance and chance. They make you want to go with them especially at the end where there seems to be a note of madness of accelerated outrageousness that might suggest that aging also has its own particular daring and other excesses – perhaps.

Dance in a Critical Discourse on Aging

Susanne Martin (with respondent Katherine Mezur)

Susanne Martin commented how much the audience gets involved, even emotional, in the age-related presentations. Perhaps, she suggests it is because concerning aging everyone is an "... expert and very personally touched by it." (Martin, email, 6/12/13)

In her own approach to critical age studies, she centers her practice as a critical starting point for an encounter with aging. Her practice is largely based in improvisation, where she moves in the moment, dealing directly with how art-making creates a "re-thinking, re-imagining, critiquing, ... in my body, in my working structures in my artistic practices." (Martin) Her Lecture Performance was presented in three performance/theory sections,

Martin gradually engaged the audience in a dialogue with their bodies, allowing us, our bodies, to enter further into a dialogue with each example. She explained her thesis and her questions and her practice-driven inquiry, which emphasizes improvisation, and then she went directly through the three examples, with transitions between to focus the audience's attention on movement and concept strategies. The focus of the audience was striking. Let me review the sections from this point of view. First she explained the use of improvisation-based dance because its "working methods may offer ways of practicing and performing dance that have the potential to challenge previously unquestioned understandings of age(ing) in the field of dance and possibly beyond." (Martin, Lecture notes) This point of improvisation-based dance methods did not come up in discussion, but Susanne carefully reminded the audience of how improvisation worked in relation to age in each performance example. The example dealing with dementia and improvisation was poignant and brilliant in its subtle play on memory and repeated phrasing. I think everyone held his or her breath during that sequence.

Martin took a moment to break down and complicate ideas of "age." She categorized different kinds of age as term, age into chronological age, functional age, social age and cultural age. While other age scholars, like Kathleen Woodward have dealt with these in the social sphere, Martin danced

and talked what she suggested is another way to ask different questions and makes the danced dementia also create its own narrative. In the second example, Martin said she is also working with the visuality of aging in which she dances with a baggy costume and an old woman's mask, topped with a very wild wig of hair. It is still Susanne Martin, she is not dancing or moving a "character." Instead the masked body is also Susanne, a middle-aged dancer, moving her age under the old age of the mask, which provokes and suggests how visual age masquerades itself. She played a Johnny Cash song of regret and broken hearts and never going back again kind of lyrics, but the masked/wigged Susanne's movements were like a dance away from that kind of nostalgia, really another kind of body-age connection, without the drag of regrets. Then Jimmy Hendrix music and song strikes the air with its bashing noise: As the commentator Martin asked me to put on a male "old person" mask and dance a short rock and roll sequence over and over again. I think we had everyone's laughter and attention! Later I was told that our bodies looked odd and strangely child-like under the masks of age, and that the masks also changed from old people to monster-like to clowns, somehow the mask allowed the bodies to be ambiguously "aged." But the dance could transform the visual "symbol" of aging that is so centered on the face and the body image we show to the world.

The following discussion, as the respondent I brought up suggestions that we also consider age studies beyond the contemporary Western dance world and consider what could be added to the aesthetic focus on youth and athletic virtuosity? From Nanako Nakajima's study and many other presentations on Asian, African, and other Western dance cultures, there is a great deal of respect and adulation for the older dancer and dance careers span a life time in many cases. Questions from the audience went over these questions: What if we thought about the body differently? What if we actually changed our aesthetics of the "beautiful" and "virtuosic"? Dancers in the audience talked about the changes in their physical appearance, their skin, their bodies changing shape, and their shrinking range of movement (if thought of only in the virtuosic scale). A lively and funny dialogue took place between Martin, myself, and the audience, concerning appearances and economics and great loss of dancers in this current climate of youth-perfect bodies. On the practical side: Can we change how funding works? Could there be government or private sources and grants just for post-50 choreographing and performing dancers? Would the increased presence of aging bodies gradually change public aesthetics in Western Dance? How do we make aging popular and desirable? Ability, race, gender and class issues also troubled these questions. Age is really not a separate classification but it is complicated by its relationship to culture, economics, religion, and politics. Now seems to be the time, to perform a new politics of aging, like Susanne Martin, deftly using the practice, the aging dancing body to probe, de-construct, and transform our visual/visceral and kinesthetic aesthetics, research, and all areas of inquiry.

Dance and Aging: Dance in the second half of life

Hubert Dinse, Gabriele Gierz, Krystina Obermaier, Christiana Rosenberg-Ahlhaus.

This session also had a Poster display, initiated by the Gesellschaft für Tanzforschung that was up for the entire conference. The posters showed several experiments in bringing older dancers together to make new works and to focus on the politics of "exit-ing" one's dance career when one can still dance. Several of these experiments on posters were entitled: 1) 'Expression of the Human Body at different Ages', which was part of a Jiri Kylian Research Project: 'One of a Kind', with Codarts Rotterdam, with Dr. Friedrike Lampert and Dr. Desiree Staverman. This project focused on the spectrum of aging bodies from 13 to 75 and creative duets, which four different age groups created and danced. From the poster, four main points emerged (which also came up in discussions) 1) The Enlargement of Esthetics, 2) Important of Experience, 3) Extension of perception, and 4) Re-evaluation of competences of age. These points moved throughout our roundtable. Another poster project was the 'iDentities Project', which was a dance production performance by five women who were dancers and choreographers over the age of fifty. The poster went through their process and then had questions and answers concerning age and dancing and age and this collaboration. It is a wonderful poster, with both enlightening and difficult answers to questions such as: "What are the advantages or satisfactions gained from dancing at this stage in your life? ... What are the greatest obstacles and challenges?" (poster 'iDentities Project') 'The MobileDance Age' was another poster presentation created by Fiona Edwards and Jo Parkes, "... to bring dancers of different generations together in

creative processes." ('MobileDance' poster) This poster brought up one of the issues discussed in the following main discussion sections of 'Dance in the Second half of life': the relationship of non-trained and trained dancers. That is "professional" is linked to youth trained dancers and the "non-professional" is linked with the untrained dancers. When dancers age, does this mean they pass into a non-professional status? Sadly these poster sessions on performance were not part of the roundtable discussion, until the very end, when several dancers asked why these topics, of the aging dancer, had not been brought up in this session on 'The second half of life'?

The format for this session was informal presentations on their work in the field of "dance in the second half of life," which for most of the session seemed to focus on elder dance programs. It also seemed that one of four presenters had a great deal to say about the physical state of aging and the sometimes pressured need to maintain youth. That is, how some dancers are working with older citizens in dance that is a kind of therapy, but not strictly therapy. There were also medial persons on the panel who had statistical evidence concerning how much dance practice can change older people's health and mental attitudes. There was also information on various funding sources and how different models for elder dance worked in different kinds of communities. One of the special communities focuses on elders with dementia and teaches dance practices which have had an amazing effect on this community.

The presentations by two elder dancers who took part in the Pina Bausch and Tanz Theater Wuppertal project with elder and young performers learning and performing 'Kontaktthof' from the original dance troupe. The older man and woman made a wonderful contribution to the discussion, really changing the conversation into another realm of debate over ideas of professional and non-professional dancers and dancing. One question concerned why older dancers and dancing with elders was relegated to "amateur dancing"? And at the end, finally, older dancers had the chance to dive into their questions concerning continuing dancing through life.

The 'Kontaktthof' male dancer spoke of his first audition and how he had no idea how to do any of the movement requested and kept asking for someone to review the movements. Just when he thought he was going to be asked to leave, he was asked to stay. He thought later, when he had had contact with Bausch and her dance directors, that perhaps it was his questioning that got him the job. He said he was asked later in rehearsals: to question his own movement and have the movement question the movement, and to be critical. He loved it, the commitment and the intensity were wonderful, but still, he wondered what their criterion was for selecting dancers. The elder woman affirmed this and commented with him on wondering how one is "chosen" to dance. It seems that many were very interested in these first hand experiences and their sense of performing a dance that was their dance but had belonged to another youthful body. The two dancers related how there had been a fear of failure among the aging dancers, but this dissipated with their insights into the irony of all their moving bodies, youth to aging, in the larger "hof" of social and individual performance. Again the session ended with more questions from older dancers who were emphatic about their concern for a deeper change in the contemporary dance world's dancer image.