

Digital Tools

By Grete Götze

The logo for 'TANZ KONGRESS' is a purple circle with a vertical yellow line passing through its center. The words 'TANZ' and 'KONGRESS' are written in yellow, uppercase, sans-serif font, stacked vertically on either side of the line.

Motion Bank Score Release

Lunch break is coming to an end and things are pretty hectic in the Capitol Theater's Club auditorium. Everyone is preparing for the 'Motion Bank score release'. William Forsythe is speaking with curator Pirkko Husemann, who goes out for a quick bite before the event begins. Outside, the sun is shining; the last of the gorgonzola risotto is being served on plastic plates. Inside, pink light illuminates red-velvet chairs, which the tech crew is putting into position.

Digital artists Florian Jenett and Amin Weber are preparing the presentation. All of the speakers are wired with mikes. Jonathan Burrows is conversing with Deborah Hay's assistant, Michèle Steinwald from Canada. Composer Matteo Fargion is relaxing on the side of the stage. Motion Bank project leader Scott deLahunta is rehearsing his remarks as moderator. Up on the dais, Hay is surrounded by men. "I don't have any grandchildren," Matteo Fargion has just intoned, so that the tech crew can check the sound. The interpreters from translating firm Bettina von Arps-Aubert have settled into their booth. They will provide a simultaneous translation of the speakers' remarks, even though the audience is so international, almost no one will need to don the company's headphones. It's a challenge all the same, since interpreters need about 10 percent more time to get a sentence into German than the speaker needs to say it in the original English.

Gradually audience members enter and, when it's time to start, deLahunta welcomes them to the event. 'Motion Bank', a four-year project, is creating online scores for choreographic pieces and is making them available through the 'Motion Bank' digital archive, he explains. For example, he and his team could have been able to use video recordings to study how choreographer Deborah Hay works, without ever having met with her. He asks the participants in the panel discussion what motivated them to document their various artistic efforts. Hay says she couldn't make rhyme or reason of what others wrote about her work, which is what inspired her to take things in hand. Her two books are titled 'Moving through the Universe in Bare Feet' and 'Lamb at the Altar: The Story of a Dance'. Jonathan Burrows says he wrote his 'Choreographer's Handbook' in order to create a record over several years of his collaboration with various artists. Publishing it allowed him to get some distance to his own work and free himself up for new ideas. William Forsythe explains that one reason 'Improvisation Technologies', a "digital dance school," exists and serves as the basis for his improvisation techniques is because a new generation is arriving on the scene and it's now technically possible to archive movement. While in a hotel in Paris in 1978 he suddenly heard a voice whispering that he had to find some way of ensuring his improvisation techniques remain available.

After this exchange, deLahunta explains how Motion Bank went about creating the electronic score: Hay sent an 18-page booklet containing directions for staging her solo piece 'No Time to Fly' to three choreographers, who spent three months learning it at different locations in New York and Australia. In April 2011 they all traveled to Frankfurt, where each dancer was recorded seven times, producing a total of 21 videos, which became the basis for the digital transcription and subsequent production steps.

“When we started the project we didn’t have any idea what we were in for, and sometimes it still seems that way,” says digital artist Florian Jenett. “Yet the feedback has been amazing.” Smiling mischievously, he adds that the three choreographers were only chosen because their dancing was relatively easy to record. Explaining his own efforts, he says, “It’s about putting together a system and collecting and organizing data. It’s a framework, like a quilt, in which you can move the various pieces around.” The computer program uses lines to depict the direction the dancers take while performing the piece. The result is recordings that are superimposed on each other, and outlines. “This allows you to recognize each performer’s unique qualities. Jeanine Durning, for example, makes generous use of the space when she dances,” he explains. “Our work makes it possible to study each choreographic piece in detail.”

Then digital artist Amin Weber talks about what he does. “I created an animated film from memory that allows you to recognize Hay’s dance. The system shows you a digital figure moving through space, depicting the tension I experienced during the performance.” It’s a digital interpretation of Hay’s work, a digital choreography of her dance. “I work with my little abstract bodies, the dancers work with real bodies,” Weber says. “It therefore becomes an expansion of reality.” Hay says her having inspired such an expansion among others gives her a wonderful feeling. “That means people can find the tools online they need to expand their art,” she explains.

In conclusion, the panel’s participants have another opportunity to express their thoughts on the Motion Bank project. Forsythe says dancers are not the only ones interested in the databank; so are people from other disciplines. “You don’t need to keep thinking about your own ideas anymore,” he says with a smile. “Others will do it for you.” Hay says, “These guys have shown me how limited my thinking was.” And Burrows points out that in terms of the digital figures, it’s not so much about focusing on individual body parts as it is about looking at entire processes of movement. “It’s almost post-human,” he says.

Working with Deborah Hay’s Motion Bank Score

Led by dancer Jeanine Durning and digital artists Amin Weber and Florian Jenett, this workshop has a number of goals: providing participants with access to the works captured by Motion Bank, illustrating Deborah Hay’s working method and demonstrating Motion Bank’s interactive nature.

Twenty-eight people have made their way to the Capitol Theater’s Studio. After finding a place on the floor in the middle of the room, they are asked to consider the following two questions from Hay’s score:

1. What if dance is how I practice my relationship with my whole body at once in relationship to the space where I am dancing in relationship to each passing moment in relationship to my audience? What if the depth of this question is on the surface?
2. What if my choice to surrender the pattern, and it is just a pattern, of facing a single direction or fixing on a singularly coherent idea, feeling or object when I am dancing is a way of remembering to see where I am in order to surrender where I am?

People begin to kneel and make circles with their bodies, inspired by the text. After they respond to another question from the score, they are asked to create a question that they can apply to their own way of perceiving. After that, they come together in groups to test their responses to other participants’ questions. What sounds a bit abstract is in fact meant to make clear the conditions dancers in different countries faced as they learned Hay’s piece ‘No Time to Fly’. And even though each dancer has his or her own method of approaching the work, the screen on which Jenett and Weber are projecting their presentation makes clear that there were similarities in how the different performers dealt with the task. Ultimately, the workshop participants spend two hours trying out approaches that they can use with their own work in the future. By the time the workshop ends they have become familiar with different structures and found their own method for using Hay’s tools.

Choreographic Resources Lab

In recent years, numerous choreographers have tried to make their work generally accessible using digital media. Participants in the Choreographic Resources Lab, which include students in the master's program at Frankfurt's University of Music and Performing Arts, are being given the opportunity to examine the tools choreographers have developed for use in education and professional dance practice, comparing their similarities and differences. To do this, the students have formed groups which will spend the next hour and a half moving through the room.

Choreographer Jason Jacobs, for example, has been joined by his fellow student Gregory Livingstone in leading the group that is working with the book 'A Choreographer's Score' by Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker and the performance theorist Bojana Cvejić. First the participants are to adopt a neutral position and then create one movement, followed by another. Then they are to learn someone else's movement and, finally, put together a dance from the various parts. The song 'Somebody That I Used to Know' by Gotye is playing in the background. In the outer courtyard students are now also dancing under the direction of Ola Scibor und Anja Bornšek to movements from Jonathan Burrows' 'A Choreographer's Handbook', accompanied by the Beatles song 'Ob-La-Di, Ob-La-Da'. In the group working with Steve Paxton's DVD 'Material for the Spine', the dancers are using their bodies to respond to sounds, such as those made by someone peeing, giving them expression and reproducing them again and again. A final group led by Miranda Glikson is working with William Forsythe's 'Synchronous Objects for One Flat Thing', reproduced and the interactive score for Deborah Hay's 'No Time to Fly'. The goal is to work with spatial structures.

What the audience sees are collective choreographies. It's possible to discern the individual elements that make up the overall composition. Yet the choreographers have different methods of explaining their tools. While De Keersmaeker and Paxton provide detailed descriptions of their work, in his 'Choreographer's Handbook' Burrows lists all of the questions that he feels are important to address when choreographing a piece and dispenses with any illustrations. For Motion Bank, however, it's about perceiving the structures of dance.

"The advantage of the publications is that they give you the opportunity to engage with the work of recognized choreographers on a very high level, without their having to be present," says Ingo Diehl, director of the master's program in Contemporary Dance Education at Frankfurt's University for Music and Performing Arts. "Yet as the activities here show, the material does not present an exact method of how you should work with it."