



Vibrating in the „Translation Zone“

Questions of Cultural Translation

By Sandra Luzina

It was a three-day delirium for André Lepecki from New York, one of the most prominent dance theorists. For many of the around 1,000 participants of the Dance Congress 2013, it was probably the same. Of course, Lepecki called for a clairvoyant intoxication, for a thinking that leaves the accustomed paths and crosses the borders between academic disciplines.

A pleasurable overtaxing is something that the organisers indeed had in mind. The excess offer of lectures, discussions, workshops and salons was stimulating, but it could also cause quite a headache. It was tricky enough to arrange one's personal timetable and itinerary through the Dance Congress. For one had to decide: Roam about or concentrate on one or two themes? Follow a lecture until the end or take a quick look again at an exciting panel discussion? At any rate, I set my inner compass anew each day – and often diverted from the path to knowledge I had taken.

The first Dance Congress 2006 in Berlin stood under the motto 'Knowledge in Motion'. The attempt to define dance as a knowledge culture had the effect of an initial spark. The third edition showed again that there is an enormous need for exchange across the borders of genres and disciplines. Moreover, it became clear that reflecting on dance, its artistic practices and social significance has reached a new level.

The debates on the topic of the body's "agency" were in any case up-to-date. In the light of the new political movements, the sociologist Oliver Marchart pointed out that the body is the most important medium of protest. And choreographers, inspired by the Occupy movement, are also increasingly thinking about artistic forms of resistance. In June 2013 a choreographer and dancer became a symbolic figure of peaceful protest in Istanbul: Erdem Gündüz, the "Standing Man" of Taksim, conceived a new form of passive resistance – and was well aware of the body's "agency".

Translating as a Cultural Practice

The overall motto, 'Bewegungen übersetzen – Performing Translations', was selected with insight, for the invited choreographers, dancers, dance scholars, critics, philosophers, sociologists, anthropologists, architects and media artists are all experts in translation and interpretation. The term translation is currently en vogue in cultural studies. And everyone agreed that contemporary dance is about complex translation processes between cultures, between bodies, between theory and practice, language and meaning. At the same time, one should beware of stylising every dance performance to a work of art that makes cultural differences productive. So it was necessary to talk about what we are actually doing when we translate or convey.

Dancing is translating – this general thesis is "at once seductive, convincing and overcharged," said Gabriele Klein, the director of the Centre for Performance Studies of the Universität Hamburg. Her general considerations on the concept of translation were indeed helpful, they formed something like a guideline through the Dance Congress, which can itself also be grasped as a multi-voiced translation activity.

Klein stressed that a translation never conveys an alleged meaning in an unchanged way and referred to Walter Benjamin's essay 'The Task of the Translator' from 1923. The philosopher and cultural theorist attributed two tasks to translation, namely, to at

once create difference and bear testimony to a "supra-historical kinship". Klein also started from a difference-theoretical concept when she stated: "Translating is always a negotiating and conveying between different things. Translation per se is therefore to be understood as a cultural and media practice."

There were signs of dissent when Gabriele Klein presented her research project dedicated to the international co-productions of the Tanztheater Wuppertal. In Klein's view, Bausch's pioneering achievement was that she developed working methods that can be grasped as complex cultural translations. Her co-productions – according to Klein – are underpinned by the "ethos of respecting borders and violating borders". She thus disagreed with some of the critics who dismissed her pieces as travel guides or folklore and criticised the cultural stereotypes. The dance scholar countered one critical objection by referring to the specific aesthetic practices, to the "how". Here, participants were in the middle of the "translation zone" – and differences had to be endured.

Dialogue with Philosophy

The Congolese choreographer Faustin Linyekula highlighted, above all, the political dimensions of this body transfer. This year's Dance Congress was opened with the production 'La Création du monde 1923 – 2012', which he developed with the Ballet de Lorraine. At the centre is a reconstruction of the "ballet nègre" from 1923, for which Kenneth Archer and Millicent Hodson were responsible. It is embedded in a present-day commentary that leads to a bitter accusation. Even if the critics had quite a few objections, the performance did raise questions as to the appropriation and colonisation of what is foreign, questions which were to permeate the entire Congress. And it also provoked misunderstandings – that could be noticed in the conversation between Faustin Linyekula and the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy. That Nancy did not first deliver a lecture on 'Dance as Image, Image as Dance' as was announced, but immediately sought a dialogue was meant as a gesture of respect. He outlined his understanding of philosophy as follows: "Philosophy is not a discourse that seeks to appropriate the object that lends it meaning in the first place."

Yet with his introductory question: "A philosopher can speak about dance. But can a choreographer dance philosophy?" he appeared to establish an asymmetry. Linyekula by no means let himself be intimidated by the philosophical authority. For him, dance is indeed a form of philosophising, the attempt to formulate a worldview, he emphasised. In view of the history of Congo, he described his position by saying: "I stand between ruins. How can I progress?" He insistently raised the question: How do Europe and Africa see each other? In his opinion, it is still a question of centre and periphery.

One rarely experiences a famous philosopher presenting thoughts on the pelvic movements of a black dancer – a "vibration" that can also be seen in other pieces by Linyekula. In Düsseldorf, the pundits outdid each other with interpretations. A reference to the African body, as Nancy contended? Or a reference to the blind spot of collective memory, to the amnesia of the West regarding the atrocities of colonialism, as the anthropologist Klaus-Peter Köpping expounded? The choreographer gave no explanation.

But towards the end Nancy did say something very nice: Dance is the opening to another place – in the body. All choreographers present would certainly have subscribed to that.

Gabriele Brandstetter, professor of theatre and dance studies at the Freie Universität Berlin, demonstrated how philosophical considerations can be applied to dance in her eye-opening lecture on the border shifts in modern and contemporary dance. It is remarkable that many choreographers are currently dealing with animals. Brandstetter took up the debate initiated by Donna Haraway on the relationship between humans and animals and showed that the artistic strategy of becoming-animal, the border-shifting encounter in dance, also always touches on ethical questions.

When Ideas Meet Bodies

The choreographers also made an impressive appearance. William Forsythe, Deborah Hay, Anne Teresa de Keersmaeker, Sidi Larbi Cherkaoui and Martin Schläpfer provided insights into their working methods. They are artists who have taken new paths and systematically reflect on their methods. They are evidently intent on passing on their knowledge and experiences.

Deborah Hay gave an account of how she liberated herself from inhibiting dogmas – through another way of posing questions that open up a space of possibilities. “What if every cell in my body at once has the potential to perceive beauty and to surrender beauty simultaneously each and every moment?” was one of the questions. The attractiveness of the question is decisive, Hay asserted, that creates space for other modes of choreography.

“People often confuse visible work with work,” said William Forsythe, who could be experienced in a dialogue with his dramaturge Freya Vass-Rhee, who is really an “extra-smart” person. It became clear on what an *enormous* amount of intellectual input a Forsythe creation is based, how the ideas are “accumulated” in the process. “One’s own ideas are not interesting,” Forsythe stressed. What is instead interesting is the moment in which his ideas meet the bodies of the dancers. Dancers, and this must be emphasised in the case of The Forsythe Company, are also capable of compositional thinking.

The Play of Borders and Transgression

In the last round of the salon ‘Interweaving Dance Cultures’, Gabriele Brandstetter summed things up. Her final considerations dealt with the borders of this interweaving – she referenced Foucault, who spoke of the play of borders and transgression. At the Dance Congress, as well, borders of understanding were occasionally revealed – even the overall atmosphere was very harmonious. When Brandstetter requested feedback from those gathered, it almost turned into a manoeuvre critique. “Translation needs time” – one female participant wrote on a slip.

New efforts are always needed to expedite the dialogue between cultures. Yet among the dance professionals, the feeling prevailed that there were more things they have in common than things separating them. The most moving closing words came from the Indian choreographer Navtej Johar. In a very personal statement, he spoke of his despair in face of global capitalism and thus took up what Lepecki has said about the “figures of dance in a system of control”. The question of whether choreographic practice is a form of resistance preoccupied many at the Dance Congress. So Navtej Johar spoke from the bottom of the heart of many participants when he demanded: “We must connect horizontally.”