



Cristina Baldacci and Susanne Franco (dir.)

## On Reenactment: Concepts, Methodologies, Tools

Accademia University Press

---

## Has Reenactment Reached an End?

Gerald Siegmund and Susanne Traub

---

DOI: 10.4000/books.aaccademia.12150  
Publisher: Accademia University Press  
Place of publication: Torino  
Year of publication: 2022  
Published on OpenEdition Books: December 14, 2022  
Series: Mimesis Journal Books  
Electronic EAN: 9791255000198



<http://books.openedition.org>

### Printed version

Date of publication: December 1, 2022

### Electronic reference

SIEGMUND, Gerald ; TRAUB, Susanne. *Has Reenactment Reached an End?* In: *On Reenactment: Concepts, Methodologies, Tools* [online]. Torino: Accademia University Press, 2022 (generated 05 octobre 2023). Available on the Internet: <<http://books.openedition.org/aaccademia/12150>>. ISBN: 9791255000198. DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/books.aaccademia.12150>.

---



The text only may be used under licence CC BY-NC-ND 4.0. All other elements (illustrations, imported files) are "All rights reserved", unless otherwise stated.

## Has Reenactment Reached an End?

Gerald Siegmund, Susanne Traub

aA

In this conversation, Gerald Siegmund (Justus-Liebig-Universität Gießen) and Susanne Traub (Deputy Head of Division Contact for Dance & Performance, Goethe Institut München) reflect on the importance of reenactment, as both a field of dance scholarship and an artistic form of contemporary dance, in the German-speaking countries. Discussing reenactment as an institutional critique as well as a manufactured response to the available funding schemes in Germany, they trace the changes in the field during the last twenty-five years wondering whether reenactment as a concept and a practice has reached an end.

147

GERALD SIEGMUND: I would like to begin with a short reflection on the importance of reenactment for dance practice and research in German-speaking countries. I hold that the reemergence of dance studies as an academic discipline during the 1990s, which culminated in the establishment of several professorships for dance studies at universities, went hand in hand with the emergence of reenactment as an artistic statement. At the time, dance artists actively researched the parameters that define the protocols of their profession, including their history and the

effect that history has on their dancing bodies. On the side of the academy, Gabriele Brandstetter's book *Tanz-Lektüren. Körperbilder und Raumfiguren der Avantgarde* (1995)<sup>1</sup> provided a model for thinking about the intersection of history and contemporary practices by considering dancing gestures and postures as tropes or figures that inevitably remember earlier configurations. This "Tanz-Lektüre" (physical or corporal reading) is done by audiences, scholars and artists alike, turning the body and its expressions into a cultural phenomenon, in which the past persists in an endless stream of refigurations. Scholars and artists met in their respective practices, which in turn fed on each other. This co-emergence, I think, helped to consolidate reenactment or remembering as legitimate forms of contemporary dance. At the same time, it changed the ways in which dance scholars dealt with dance history, which could now also be studied on the stage *in actu* rather than exclusively in archives. History became performative. If you want to study dance history, go to the theatre!

148

SUSANNE TRAUB: I agree, at this point in time history became performative. The performative encounter with dance history and documents guides my specific interest in forms of reenactment. This is especially true for my curatorial and dramaturgical practice. In general, my reflections circle around the convergence of artistic and scholarly forms of research and experimentation, which inevitably leads to a convergence of practices of reenactment and remembrance. It also brings together contemporary experiences and the writing of history as the history of the present. If I consider performance to be an active doing *of* and *with* artistic and academic and political categories, then this attitude allows me to position myself towards history in a critical manner, while at the same time detaching myself from history. To approach history and heritage in such a way is, in my view, an activist way of gaining knowledge. Furthermore, I have a solid interest in ideological criticism. This is why the forms

aA

1. Gabriele Brandstetter, *Tanz-Lektüren. Körperbilder und Raumfiguren der Avantgarde* (Frankfurt a. M.: Fisher Verlag, 1995; 2. edition Freiburg: Rombach Wissenschaft, 2013; eng. transl. *Poetics of Dance*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2012).

of reenactment that interest me describe both a research project and an attitude. To remember and to make present and critically reflect history become the same. For me, embodiment as such is both extremely fascinating and political. I think that my special – but not exclusive – interest in dance has to do with my fascination with embodiment as a political act. I like to break out of established procedures and look for a way of engagement with things, that is, to quote Hannah Arendt, “a thinking without handrails”. In this complex context, it became exciting for me to look at the difference between being in the time of the performance or in the time of reflection on the past. I guess these are all different states of embodiment. More often than not, I like to focus on the one hand on minute differences between acts of presenting/performing and on the other, on references to historical contexts that I bring to the performance from the outside while I watch and experience it.

aA

I change my position by trying to think from the inside and the outside of the performance. Obviously, both activities are performative and at work simultaneously. Redoing, reenacting and rethinking are interdependent with each other. In analyzing reenacted movement material, alternative actions and attitudes arise, so I tend to evaluate them differently from traditional movement material. The relation between reenacting and reconstructing remains fascinating to me. The entanglement of doing and thinking, movements of dance and movements of thought inspire me. In this context, it is equally important to note that which has been omitted or not shown in a performance. Whether this act of forgetting was conscious or unconscious does not matter. What is important is to constantly check routines, protocols and the canon in order to avoid forgetting for political reasons. Remembering becomes a political act as soon as it implies asking questions about the present and the future. Therefore, it always seems interesting to me to create a dynamic relationship between different time frames. Indeed, remembering in a German context can never be innocent again.

149

GS: Yes, definitely. The strong interest that the generation of dance artists from the late 1990s had in reenactments and reconstructions was heavily motivated by questions of

politics and access to history, and by what was forgotten and for which reasons. My point was that as soon as you start conceptualizing history not only as written documentation or visual representation but also as an embodied memory and physical practice, the whole field of scholarship shifts from universities to dance studios. Dancers acquire a certain kind of scholarly knowledge about history from various sources and documents that their practices can access according to their aesthetic, political or social agendas. Documented history can be researched as a dance practice, to then be reenacted or reconstructed as a performance. The result of that knowledge is obviously different from the knowledge scholars would acquire when working in an archive. What is interesting to me is that you do not conceptualize history traditionally – diving in the archive and dealing with documents of various sorts – but actually you reactivate it in the dance studio, struggling with it as a contemporary artist. Suddenly as a scholar you find yourself on the floor level with dancers and choreographers. For me as a scholar, encountering this “equality of intelligences”, as Jacques Rancière calls it, between artists and myself as a young scholar was a very satisfying experience that still informs my scholarly work on, for instance, artists like Jérôme Bel or Xavier Le Roy. We talk about the same thing, but in a different way. Nobody knows more or less. The ways we talk about performance are different but equal.

aA

ST: Yes, you are definitely right. Do you remember the project *Moving Thoughts–Tanzen ist Denken* (2000) in Leipzig?<sup>2</sup> You were also part of the conference, or to use a better term, these three days of “happenings”. We explored options of how to undo the barriers between practicing dance in a studio or reenacting dance, between inventing dance for the stage or researching it while studying dance at university. Of course, contemporary experience (of dance?) is always layered: each performance has its executors, audience, and spaces, all developing their own kind of experience. But what is interesting to me is that, despite the individual, personal

2. Janine Schulze, *Moving Thoughts–Tanzen ist Denken* (Berlin: Vorwerk 8 Verlag, 2003).

ways of interacting with the performance itself, we are all in a position to share movement in common: feelings, experiences, thoughts, as well as worldviews.

While discussing reenactment today, this also needs to be brought to attention. This needs to be remembered. I wonder if this is the case today and if we still share the same ground, the same common feelings or interests. Since the time of the conference, reenactment as an artistic practice and as a theoretical approach has spread considerably, not only in the field of the visual arts but also in theatre. For me, there is a difference between reenactment as a practice in dance and as a practice in German theatre. So, I would like to know more about your position on reenactment outside the field of dance. I have in mind Anta Helena Recke, a very intelligent emerging theatre director who reenacted an existing *mise-en-scène* from Anna-Sophie Mahler's play *Mittelreich* (2015) at Kammerspiele in Munich. She did a faithful reenactment of the production, the only difference being that she cast exclusively Black people. Whilst I liked the production, it challenged my perception, leading me to ask myself whether I was included in her intention and whether the experience was meant to be shared with me or not. At that moment, it became clear to me that there is a difference between reconstruction and reenactment. By replacing the entirely white cast with black performers, she showed me that reenactments imply the appropriation of movements and their codes, an appropriation of techniques that changes our perception of the whole piece, which leads to new challenges.

aA

151

GS: I think the performance you are referring to addresses a much larger question that is also part of dance reenactments, namely the question of "Institutional Critique". In fact, I consider Recke's performance to be an attempt to reflect on the fact that German theatre institutions still employ mainly white actors or actresses. What happens, she asks, if we turn the situation around and only cast *BIPOC* (black, indigenous and people of colour) performers? So I see the performance as a conceptual statement rather than aiming at a common experience. Quite the opposite. She wants you to feel excluded just as *BIPOC viewers* may feel excluded from a performance with an all-white cast.

ST: Absolutely. We all share the common feeling of being excluded.

GS: But to come back to the question of reenactments as Institutional Critique. From the very beginning, reenactment practices have coincided with a kind of Institutional Critique that raised urgent questions about what counts as contemporary dance, the institutional choices about programming contemporary dance and the expectations of audiences about what they have learned contemporary dance can be. Forms of reenactment quite clearly contradict notions of the originality of movement, the invention of a movement vocabulary and the necessity of some kind of dance technique. All these notions were nourished by modern and contemporary dance until the 1990s. Thus, questions about who is allowed to perform as a dancer on stage – only trained bodies, only pieces of work that display virtuosic movement styles – were put on the table. So, somehow reenactment and Institutional Critique are related. Maybe there is also a link to *Mittelreich* and your argument about exclusion. Just as you as a white European woman feel excluded from the theatre a lot of people at the time thought they were excluded from dance performances and that they were not experiencing dance at all because they could not relate what they saw to their experiences and knowledge of dance.

ST: Yes, definitely. If this is the case, then we should have another look at the concept of reenactment and the various techniques the dancers bring to the game. For me, with every technique there is always a kind of ideology involved in regard to the body. While I am doing or redoing a piece or a choreography, what actually happens is that my whole body – my mind, my flesh, my blood – is not separated from the gesture: dancing is thinking, and vice versa. This means that as a dancer and as a member of the audience, I will always have to deal with technique. Either I accept the ideology that comes with technique, or I conflict with it.

GS: What you just said raises another important issue concerning reenactments. Reenactments require that you, as an artist and as a member of the audience, position

yourself as a situated subject in a contemporary context. Why are you doing this today? Reenactments deal with the present and not primarily with the past. Reenactments address both the artist and the audience in a different way from a traditional dance or theatre performance, which aims at a universal subject or, rather, a form of universal subjectivity in which we all may come together. With reenactments, there seems to be a need to make the conditions under which the performance takes place explicit instead of assuming that everybody experiences it the same way.

ST: I think so, too. And now, I will dig a little deeper into history. While studying dance history, I was very impressed by the importance that dance on stage acquired during the period of Romantic ballet. The aims of ballet coincided with the necessity of inventing a form of art that could step out of the rigid rules of society in which nobody felt comfortable. At the time of Romantic ballet, every stage represented the chance to show an immaterial world built on a new technique, which would be able to narrate stories and describe a new reality. This radical sensibility is something that I still find interesting, even if I do not find any pleasure in seeing those skinny girls dancing, or if – out of a feminist perspective – I have plenty of reasons not to share the same values that gave birth to that form of art.

GS: Would you go so far as to say that this phenomenon of technique – which also allows a certain redoing, repetition and reenactment – is the foundation for dance to become an autonomous art form as in Romantic ballet? Or that this kind of traditional technique is still going on in more contemporary forms of reenactment?

ST: Technique allows for autonomy, and this is why it is still working in contemporary forms of dance. I think that whilst technique is always a way to objectify, reiteration through technique is also a way of reflecting on objectification. Each new performer is involved in a dialogue between objectification and subjectification. So, I definitely agree with you on that; probably, this is something we can also transfer to other disciplines.



GS: This line of argument may also relate to *Ausdruckstanz* (Dance of Expression), the German Modern Dance because somehow, these artists tried to avoid the technical solution of reenacting or repeating and went for the subjective point of view.

ST: Yes, you are right, but I think there is another problem involved in *Ausdruckstanz*. There is the question of technique, and then there is the question of whether we can create something expressive. As a dancer, I can actually objectify myself entirely and do something that someone can look at. *Ausdruckstanz* or expression is always there: every performer expresses himself or herself while dancing. I find it interesting that *Ausdruckstanz*, on the one hand, fought against classical technique and opposed the ideology of ballet. These artists wanted to show something else, but on the other hand, they reached a point where the idea of expression itself became an ideology.

So, my point is that even when you intend not to have a technique, you actually either have one or are constructing a new one. Even improvisation, deduction and reconstruction are modes of expression with a strong technique. *Ausdruckstanz* – or expressive dance in general – has also had a technique, which is interesting to reflect on because this aspect was not considered at the beginning of its history.

GS: I have always found it interesting how dancers of a younger generation deal with the political issues of *Ausdruckstanz*. Its tradition is from a specific cultural, ethical, and even geographical background and a kind of friction always comes up when somebody from a different cultural context approaches dances from 1930s Germany. The migration from body to body opens up new perspectives at the execution and fruition levels. Again, this is a very specific physical approach to history as opposed to an elaborate postcolonial theory of how bodies merge and transform. It is a very hands-on thing which I like very much.

ST: I like it too. I have another concern about the notion of expression: could you reenact an “expression”? Can an emotional expression be part of a reenactment, or can you only ever reenact specific shapes, forms or images? Two

years ago, I saw a performance that impressed me deeply. The piece was called *Pink Money* by choreographer Antje Schupp. I would characterize the piece as pure expression. The dancers addressed their personal experiences of discrimination and oppression, which I kept thinking about after the performance. Probably because they were so horrific, and I never had to go through what they went through. I have never experienced this very strong form of embodiment, which simply blew me away, through a reenactment.

GS: Would you say that, given the experience that you just shared, along with the phenomenon of reenactment that has been critically accompanying us for the past twenty five years, there has not been a real expression of our contemporary needs? Should we look for something else? Something more political?

ST: I would definitely say that we always need political ideas, otherwise things move into boring repetition. Today, in my opinion, there is a conflict between this political need in dance and cultural politics. In Germany, the establishment of *Tanzfonds Erbe* – a fund you can apply for if your art production relies on dance history or heritage – produces a certain imbalance. I have no objection to the fund because I think it is necessary to fuel a certain kind of artistic production. But having said that, I also wish for a fund for projects that are not necessarily in accordance with history and can bring some new political issues to the table.

GS: To explain: *Tanzfonds Erbe* was a program that the Kulturstiftung des Bundes – the cultural foundation of Germany – initiated at the outcome of *Tanzplan Deutschland*, which ran from 2005 to 2010. *Tanzplan* aimed to enhance activities around dance in local communities and cities. By bringing the various players of a town or region to work together and start new initiatives for bringing dance forward, *Tanzplan* wanted to change the structural conditions for dance in specific areas. In my opinion, as a former jury member that decided on the proposals, it succeeded in doing precisely that. Interestingly enough, Hortensia Völkers, now artistic director of Kulturstiftung des Bundes,

has, in her previous incarnation as a dance curator, curated a dance festival in 2000 for *Wiener Festwochen* and *ImPulsTanz Vienna* that consisted entirely of various types of reenactments. The publication that accompanied the project was called *ReMembering the Body*.<sup>3</sup>

*Tanzfonds Erbe*, which ran from 2012 to 2019, was aimed at funding individual artistic projects that explicitly dealt with historical positions in dance without, however, stipulating any results. Artists were free to work in whatever form or format they chose. But you are, of course, right when you say that there has been a political decision to institutionalize reenactments and explore what history still means to them and how it speaks to them for their own artistic practice today. As you say, the program has been criticized precisely for the fact that it fuels an artificial need for dealing with history rather than actually looking at more pressing contemporary issues or artistic formats that have nothing to do with historical positions in dance. However, the interesting point about the institutionalization of reenactments is that dance now is in a much stronger position as cultural heritage in Germany than before all these initiatives.

aA

ST: Yes, you have just added something else to the discussion: you brought in the idea of acknowledgement. I mean, if we do not acknowledge each other's rights or if we do not understand that we need to reflect on the way in which we represent black people or women for example, the institution, the aim of which is to acknowledge, to validate, to discuss, turns into a form of disacknowledgement. When I worked as a dramaturg for the theatre – at Schauspielhaus Frankfurt, for instance – I always tried to bring more recent artistic positions to the program, as I am convinced that dance, as a moving art form, is also a tool that can move thoughts. Take the queen of German dance, Pina Bausch: she brought dance into the museum space not just in search of something different – like museums do nowadays – but because she wanted to go beyond pure

3. Gabriele Brandstetter, Hortensia Völckers, eds., *ReMembering the Body* (Hamburg: Hatje Cantz Publications, 2000).

technique and experiment by applying a new dramaturgical method.

GS: Yes! Considering the time, I think we should move on to a kind of conclusion. I am sure there would be a lot more to say about dancing in the museums and the way dance is institutionalized by theatre or museums and gallery spaces – which would lead the discussion to a reflection on the intersection between visual and performing arts. I am sure that visual arts started showing dance within their programs because they wanted to enter into a different relationship with their audiences. They feel the need for physical urgency to go beyond the dead artefacts they hang on the museum walls. I am unsure whether this is what dance artists look for when they enter the museum space. I would like to suggest a different argument. I consider the reenactment craze to be a phenomenon of the digital revolution. As sociologist Dirk Baecker claims, when societies change their main or leading medium, the first result is data overkill. From oral cultures to the printing press, the transition from the book to the computer results in a surplus of information that nobody in their right mind can process. To delimit it and separate the valuable from the useless, societies must develop ways to channel the flow. If everything is potentially available for everybody all the time, pieces of information lose their value and validity.

What still counts in a changing society has to be determined by selection processes. As for the arts, and dance in particular, the impulse to reenact may be understood as precisely such a process. Artists turn to the past to find out what pieces of information are still valid for their work today. What can we save? What can we forget? However, other distribution channels and spaces for experiencing are probing to find out what is valid. Maybe dance works better in the open space of a museum or in relation to other artworks; it communicates perhaps more in a different environment than the theatre. Playing around with frames, therefore, aims to reassure dance of its potential to communicate and mean something. Thus, reenactments speak of the contemporary artists' desire to find their place amidst the debris of our information society. It could be an

interesting way to look at dance in the museum. But maybe this can be a question for a different “duet”.

ST: Yeah, this is right, and let me say that maybe – in another “duet” – we could talk about how museum directors or curators use the term reenactment.

GS: Definitely. Thank you very much, Susanne.

ST: Thank you for choosing me as your conversation partner on the occasion of this conference.

GS: We will keep this conversation going anyway next time we meet.

ST: Yes, we will do it!