

Dance Aesthetics as Politics of Friendship

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“Is the friend the same one or the other one?”¹ is a central question in Jacques Derrida’s book *Politics of Friendship*. His concept of friendship focuses on togetherness “beyond the principle of fraternalism”², it is about democracy as a mode, in which everyone is allowed to be different in equal measure. This *politics of friendship* can be short-circuited with the economy of collaboration, of elective affinity, and of complicity to which contemporary dance aesthetics is definitely exposed. Here cohesion is often configured through its crisis, as though we are together just because we miss cohesion – like an arch being stable, “only because all the loose stones holding it together want to collapse”.³

For collaborative working processes, any notion of a pre-emptive affirmative community has to be disappointed – due to the irredeemability of a community, i.e., its crisis is its constitutive moment. It is a moment of affiliation and testimony that does not require any given group or plural. That moment rather looks into its own irredeemability, provided that the ‘we’ will always have been a temporary construct: Just in order to keep together what is different within artistic work processes, and to welcome the other unconditionally – in the precise vagueness of parallel worlds in which we belong together so strangely. Without ignoring the empty spaces, the rifts, the fissures: *mind the gap!*

At issue are the communities of those who are mainly driven by non-affiliation, by the essential groundlessness of being together. Dance

today is still interesting as an exercise in “un-avowable”⁴, “un-presentable”⁵ communities, in “communities to come”⁶, as an exercise in temporary co-structures. Incompleteness is taking its form, discarding aesthetic and political phantasms of purity. At issue is the contingency of cohesion, its unstable resistance, its critical stance of *I would prefer not to* that would rather not participate – exactly in order to be with.

This being-with happens in crisis and as critique, i.e., as the ability to differentiate, which requires decisions, resolutions, conclusiveness, re-actions. Hence, it is political. A friend of mine asks: “What is the difference between choice and decision?” He answers that we can choose between white and red wine, i.e., between given options. But if we decide, then it is for an option not given. But how much of the not-given and inefficient, untimely – not as an anachronism but rather something decidedly different – does contemporary dance bear? And how much does it demand?

“Time is my only contemporary” – Milli Bitterli quotes Nietzsche in her choreography *Tausendfüßler* (*Millipedes*, 2016). The philosopher of the untimely and of otiosity discerns the artist as a blind crayfish “which incessantly feels around to all sides, and *occasionally* catches something. However, it does not feel around in order to catch, but because its limbs simply have to move”⁷. When limbs simply

4 Maurice Blanchot: *La Communauté inavouable*, Paris: Les Éditions de Minuit 1984.

5 Jean-Luc Nancy: *La Communauté affrontée*, Paris: Galilée 2001; *La Communauté désavouée*, Paris: Galilée 2014.

6 Giorgio Agamben: *La comunità che viene*, Torino: Giulio Einaudi editore 1990.

7 Friedrich Nietzsche: *Fragmente 1880 – 1882*, Kritische Studienausgabe, eds. G. Colli and M. Montinari, Munich/Berlin/New York: dtv/de Gruyter 1988, p. 17.

1 Jacques Derrida: *Politik der Freundschaft*, Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp 2002, p. 21. [*Politiques de l’amitié*, Paris: Galilée 1994].

2 Ibid, p. 12.

3 Heinrich von Kleist to Wilhelmine von Zenge, Berlin, 16th November 1800.

move, bustle, budge, stir aimlessly and idly, then an uncalled longing is dancing, and at the same time its dance longs for a lapse, for a désœuvrement – at the hem of work and of time, which overturns them.

It is a longing for an overturn of time instead of a closed time economy, instead of metaphysical speculation on well-timed returns, on symmetry, on gift for gift, on redemption of value and of a credit-worthy world of given works and words. Dis-wording the doxa, working on the paradox, working on désœuvrement, on idleness – rather not-doing, not-participating in order to be with, rather being in crisis, in the paradoxical economy of our resisting agency that can overthrow the order of things. And it is also – via that critical togetherness as a group on stage – about our being together off stage, always in uncertain relations.

The contemporary dance body is a *Body Not Fit For Purpose* (2014) – thus the title of a work by Jonathan Burrows and Matteo Fargion, which anticipates the insufficiency of the dance gesture when it comes to formulating intentions, reasons, and grounds, but at the same time addresses the inherent radicalness of that attempt. Once again, we look into the groundless – with Burrows and Fargion’s abyssal humour which unconditionally belongs to the seriousness of contemporary dance aesthetics.

Moving in the rhythm of the groundless is always marked by interminability. “No numerus clausus for those who come along, who join”⁸, writes Jacques Derrida in *Politics of Friendship*. This interminability, which exclu-

des nothing and no-one, is so virulent for our zeitgeist, or better: for our zeit-ghosts – and hence for our research on and in crisis. This is research, opening-up towards something uncanny, unknown: For especially when we are researching we do not yet know what we are doing.⁹ This would be the potential of crisis in *artistic research*, a constellation of words which often rightfully, but sometimes too often moves the tongue of contemporary dance (a bit like René Magritte’s painted pipe which you cannot take into your mouth – unless as a word).

The momentum of friendship cannot be determined because it is always to come; communities to come are temporary, uncanny alliances or, according to Michel Foucault, “egregious families”¹⁰. Again, we move away from fraternisation, and from the family, towards the uncanny elective affinity. On the binding groundlessness of the movement between friends, Michel Foucault writes: “They face each other without weapons, without arms or fitting words, without anything that might confirm the sense of the movement that brings them together.”¹¹ Again, bodies not fit for purpose.

Contemporary dance touches surfaces without sentimentally homogenising them, and without the metaphysics of interiority: in all contingency of a contact that happens, occurs, and is imparted only in partition, in

9 Hans-Jörg Rheinberger on 25th October 2013 in a discussion with the author in the framework of the talk series *Idleness. A lazy talk series* at Tanzquartier Wien.

10 Michel Foucault: “Was ist ein Autor?“, in: F. Jannidis / G. Lauer / M. Martinez / S. Winko (eds.): *Texte zur Theorie der Autorschaft*, Stuttgart 2003, p. 201.

11 Michel Foucault: “Von der Freundschaft als Lebensweise“, in: *Von der Freundschaft*. Michel Foucault im Gespräch, Berlin: Merve 2005, p. 87. [„De l’amitié comme mode de vie“, *Le nouvel observateur*, No. 1021, Paris 1984.]

the non-intactness of tactile experience which affects split subjects and takes no immediacy as given. That non-intactness – aesthetically, ethically, politically – ever opens and closes the quotation marks of ‘being-with’, like opening and closing one’s eyes, like a contraction, like contracting friendships.

Can we still see contemporary choreography as a kind of sonography of our time, as a body check in being-with, in wit(h)nessing, testifying, evoking, revoking, in suspending dogmatic representation, as if inspired by Roland Barthes’ idea of the *neuter*? “I call that a neuter which suspends the paradigm, i.e., the conflict”¹², Barthes writes. As a third item, the *neuter* subverts the binary structure inherent to any paradigm, and thus eludes dogmatic and hierarchic ways of representation. The *neuter* is ambivalent and by no means neutral.

Does this not-at-all neutral *neuter*, which annuls doxa and turns to the paradox also trigger the political in contemporary dance, assumed the political is conceived as an abrogation, a not-allowing of its own law, an abandonment of doxa, a de-monstration of the paradox? When we taste contemporary dance as an aesthetic figure of the politics of friendship, it is not about rhythmical, synchronous togetherness as a social utopia as in early modern dance. It is rather about an *idiorhythmic* one – conceiving togetherness according to Roland Barthes’ book *Comment vivre ensemble*¹³ as *idiorhythmics*. Barthes is

interested in *idiorhythmics* as an occasional synchronisation of action rhythms, which yet remain divergent.

Yet, what does it mean today to move synchronously, executing a movement together, and not just celebrating virtuosity? What is interesting here is precisely the simultaneity of the asynchronous, just like a simultaneous translation always implies a shift, or just like potentiality does not resolve into actuality. What is interesting here is the potentiality of coming together beyond causality, rather as an enumeration, stringing together, a listing that lets commonplaces go to pieces instead of claiming mutual availability.

That’s why the mere listing, enumerating, hierarchy-less stringing together or alphabetising of the performative material avoids the hierarchy of items. Hence, it names nameless differences, and short-circuits parallel articulation levels, like in the alphabetically sorted 12-hour work by Yosi Wanunu and Peter Stamer (2015) *The Circus of Life. A – Z*. The aesthetics of listing suspends dependences, connections, conjunctures and conjunctions.

This aesthetics is about paratactic and not about hierarchic listing: a conjunctive mood instead of conjunction and conjuncture, a possible mode of contemporary dance and of its theory that does not take itself too seriously, but seriously enough to be a theory as aesthetic praxis itself. We are dealing with a rhythm of heterogeneous listing which ever anew disarticulates fixations imminent upon articulation, and which is conclusive only if it avoids conclusions and persists in the para-

12 Roland Barthes: Das Neutrum - Vorlesung am Collège de France 1977-1978, Frankfurt a.M.: Suhrkamp 2005. [Roland Barthes: *Le neuter. Cours et séminaires au Collège de France [1977-1978]*, Paris: Traces écrites 2002.]

13 Roland Barthes: *Comment vivre ensemble. Simulations romanesques de quelques espaces quotidiens. Notes de cours et*

de séminaires au Collège de France 1976-1977, Paris: Éditions du Seuil 2002.

dox. It is about a continuous depositioning of dispositives, about a forceful humour with its contaminated lists and levels.

“Humour is something totally aggressive”, says the performer Kristof Van Boven in Meg Stuart’s *Until our hearts stop* (2015). Or: “I used to spend my holidays at the Mediterranean. But now I cannot swim in the Mediterranean.” Or: “Here we transgress all our boundaries.” And the performers in *Until our hearts stop* are doing it literally – in a bottomlessly comical scenic obscenity, which at times seems to go too far, precisely because intimacy and integrity can never go far enough. Several couples whirl around vertiginously, each with their counterpart’s fist in their mouth. The fist in the other’s mouth holds the rotating couples together. The dancers come uncannily close to each other in all kinds of constellations – ménage-à-trois, groups of four, five, six, seven –, before they hastily get out of each other’s way. Here we could think about dance aesthetics as *idiorhythmic*s of the *neuter*.

In fact, the infected, contaminated lists and levels of humour – like the *idiorhythmic*s of the *neuter* – hone dance aesthetics. They do not downplay anything, provided they are working on their own grounds and abysses, on the non-convergence of motives, on the desire and disorder of the difference we all are beholden to. For, as Jean Baudrillard formulated his anger against the incestuous concept of the all too slick fraternisation, “who lives from the same will die by the same”¹⁴.

The listing and *idiorhythmic* sense of dance might go insane, but never loses sight of differentiating. It might lose its mind, but it does not mind understanding, rather, it releases us from understanding. It is about a “release from understanding as a proof of love”¹⁵, a proof of friendship, too. Again: “Is the friend the same one or the other one?” Instead of co-understanding, we might rather problematize the ‘co-’. For example: Is the audience laughing along? Or is each member of the audience laughing alone? The singular vibrations of laughter jolt the automatisms of community and identity by continuously laying open new asymmetries.

Tim Etchells instructs his performers: “Split the audience. Make a problem of them. Disrupt the comfort and anonymity of the darkness. Make them feel the differences present in the room and outside of it (class, gender, age, race, power, culture). Give them the taste of laughing alone. The feel of a body that laughs in public and then, embarrassed, has to pull it back.”¹⁶ In the programme of Forced Entertainment’s 24-hour performance *Who can sing a song to unfrighten me*, Tim Etchells lists the inventory: “Dogs, alphabets, panda bears, fatalities, fairy tales, horror stories, dances, and jokes.”

The aesthetics of humour focuses on the calculated missing of time, the bad timing, the rapid standstill of punchlines, the doubt of language about the body, the despair of

14 Jean Baudrillard: *Die Transparenz des Bösen. Ein Essay über extreme Phänomene*, Berlin: Merve 1992, p. 72f. [*La Transparence du Mal. Essai sur les phénomènes extrêmes* O Editions Galilée, Paris 1990.]

15 Marcus Steinweg on 3 June 2016 in a discussion with the author in the framework of the talk series *The pleasure of the text. A Discursive Ménage-à-trois* at Tanzquartier Wien. Marcus Steinweg is the friend asking about the difference between choice and decision.

16 Tim Etchells: “Not part of the bargain. Notes on First Night”, Forced Entertainment Contextualising Pack 2001.

the body about language, when body and language upend each other, come across each other, talk at cross-purposes. As an *idiorhythmic* tremor of surfaces, laughter addresses the vibrating aesthetic intervals, the fault lines between the parallel worlds to which we, strange humans, funnily enough simultaneously belong, longing for habitus, i. e., for verticals, and for horizons in common.

Humour short-circuits parallel surfaces of articulation and problematizes witless theories of witnessing, affiliation, and community, makes these surfaces falter by getting stuck in desiccated theories, like in one's throat. "Laughter is a chaos of articulation", writes Walter Benjamin. So bitterly apposite for our time, this chaos of articulation, this crisis of disarticulation.

Yet, the ambiguous gestures of that crisis dis-articulate dance history, make its academic dryness twitch. Like that famous "twitching of the upper lip" which eventually may have sparked the French Revolution according to Kleist's *On the Gradual Production of Thoughts Whilst Speaking*.¹⁷ Once again and in a different way, the order of things is overthrown, and the potential of crisis appears as a turning phase. "Theatre is crisis. This is – and actually should be – the definition of theatre. It can only work as crisis and in the crisis, otherwise it has absolutely no relation to society outside of theatres", Heiner Müller writes.¹⁸

The humour in dance aesthetics as chaos of articulation, as a twitching of an upper lip. Or: the irony of lips as quotation marks of what has not been said, in the mode of *I would prefer not to*, as resisting reasons, as groundlessness of movement, i.e., as dance. Thus, contemporary dance aesthetics could also be conceived of as a productive crisis of grounds, as aesthetics of listing that dances *idiorhythmically* and names nameless differences. This aesthetics dances with politics of désœuvrement, with politics *not fit for purpose*, *politics of friendship*, both facing "each other without weapons, without arms or fitting words, without anything that might confirm the sense of the movement that brings them together".

17 Heinrich von Kleist: "Die allmähliche Verfertigung der Gedanken beim Reden", in: Heinrich von Kleist: Sämtliche Werke und Briefe in zwei Bänden, ed. Helmut Sembdner, Munich 1952, vol. 2, p. 321. [Cf. Krassimira Kruschkova: "How did you come together? On Contemporaneity of Dance and Performance", keynote lecture at the Dance Kongress Hannover 2016, <http://www.tanzkongress.de/en/documentation/texts/texts.html>].

18 Heiner Müller: "Theater ist Krise. Arbeitsgespräch vom 16. Oktober 1995", in: Heiner Müller: Gespräche 3, Suhrkamp: Frankfurt a. M. 2008, p. 810 f.