

*Dance and Politics*, edited and compiled by Alexandra Kolb (Bern: Peter Lang, 2011)

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There are passionate discussions in the field of dance and politics at the moment. This anthology attempts to participate in them, with articles ranging from the very heated to the coolly judicious. Alexandra Kolb sets her edited anthology apart from much recent discourse on how dance is linked to conceptualizations of the political. She suggests that to use politics as a conceptual proposition exposes it to 'becoming vacuous to excessive proliferation ... in the field of dance studies' (1), and prefers instead 'to give structure to this wide and often disorganized terrain' (9) by narrowing the perspective. While the chapters do not deal with gender, race or ethnicity or with a postmodern/structuralist perspective of politics (that include the relationship of the body's position within media and performance), they do set in motion two continual questions: Can dance provoke critical intervention? And how can the effect be evaluated? To do this, the anthology concentrates on Western dance that engages with 'explicit' historical political contexts. Using this perspective on dance and politics, the book presents some interesting challenges and insights.

Kolb's introduction teases out the current debate as to whether or not dance needs to be political in order to remain a valid art form. She presents the dilemma of difference that exists between modernist and postmodernist definitions of the political, and she evokes the premise that, regardless of the choreographies' actual content, dance is not only implicitly or explicitly political but allied to particular positions on the political spectrum. '[T]he political aspect is located in the work's radical form' (17), she writes. However, drawing on Marcuse, Kolb wonders if dance, as an inherently aesthetic performance practice, 'can actually have an impact ... or inaugurate societal change', (20) prompting the question: Does it have to?

Aesthetics and politics belong to a terrain that is more than skin-deep and here interpretation becomes a central issue. Kolb questions whether radical change requires radical performance and suggests (following Hans-Thies Lehmann - in an unfortunate editing error referred to as 'Jürgen Lehmann'), that perhaps this is not the case. Explicit and implicit politics in modern and postmodern dance may be able to transmit political messages or at least 'be political,' leading Kolb to the conclusion that, '... certain historical examples suggest *prima facie* that a political impact for dance is possible' (26). I was left to wonder if she agrees with the conciliatory reflection she borrows from Denise Varney's response to Lehmann, that different types of valid political expression can co-exist, or if by organising this book from the perspective of the explicit, she subtly states her position otherwise.

The first section, titled *Choreographing the Revolution*, presents three articles that explore the way in which choreography can express revolutionary events. Roger Copeland's *The Death of the Choreographer* seems designed to instigate a counter-revolutionary motion in the analysis of dance theory. After Kolb's measured and deliberately impartial introduction, Copeland's article, in which he responds to the infiltration of dance-theory by literary and poststructuralist discourse, is fervent and inflamed. Both literary theory and poststructuralist discourse are, he finds, insufficiently verifiable to warrant such strict predominance in institutional

preferences and research perspectives. He claims that the academic obsession with poststructuralism comes from a misguided assumption that modernism – ‘the time before the audience became important,’ when the artist was still most important – was a bourgeois and capitalist plot to subjugate collaboration and collective production (45). He argues that Susan Foster, under the influence of Roland Barthes, has misappropriated literary theory to foster the notion of the death of the author, thus trivializing authorship and aggrandizing collaboration. Consequently, he suggests that an emphasis on collaboration undermines the possibility of the individual artist to appropriately author their work. Copeland’s arguments are valuable and pointed, but at times rash and unsubstantiated. For example, his attack on feminism with the suggestion that feminist professors are intent on calling seminars ‘ovulars’ undermines his otherwise interesting argument.

In the following chapter, *‘Theatre has to become political again...’*, Kolb takes us back to some straightforward, but no less ideological, views from the East German (ex-DDR) choreographer Johan Kresnik. Kresnik is as volatile as Copeland in his opinions and temperament and Kolb’s interview facilitates his revelations of the underlying complications that still exist between East and West Germany. The article is well placed to illustrate Copeland’s view of an independent author/choreographer making dances about his or her ‘authorial’ and independent view of collective justice. Copeland’s critical view of the manner in which Marx has been appropriated is juxtaposed with Kresnik’s deeply held Marxist ideologies. Whereas Copeland takes aim at his academic peers, Kresnik remains opposed to party politics, political systems and blind bureaucracy, displaying a more personalized and idiosyncratic view relating to direct political issues – indeed, those often forgotten in the poststructuralist configuration of current discourse.

Alexandra Kolb’s final chapter in this section traces how choreographers express historical, violent, anti-state activism on modern podia. By highlighting two works that are similarly concerned with previous radical political history – Johan Kresnik’s choreography *Ulrieke Meinhof (1990)*, a work based on a controversial member of the RAF faction of the 1970s in Germany; and David Dorfman’s choreography *Underground (2006)*, inspired by the 1970s American underground organization Weathermen – Kolb reflects on differences between the aesthetic and political approaches of each. She brings to light Marcuse’s warning against overtly political messages that situate the work didactically rather than politically and Kershaw’s notion of ‘performance efficacy’ as a more open proposition of affectivity.

The second section in the anthology, *Dance of Enemies*, tackles the tenuous ethical intersection in which dance as an art form, and as a political practice, exists. Marion Kant, who has already written extensively on Mary Wigman, dissects Wigman’s involvement with the National Socialists and the Third Reich. She uses the early part of the chapter to recognize Wigman’s insistence that she was apolitical, and the second to divulge how politically embroiled her work really was. While ultimately ‘outing’ Wigman’s political biases, I wondered about the venom of Copeland’s attack on Foster’s political agenda compared to Kant’s measured exposure of Wigman’s ultimately cold blooded and self-aware affiliations with a murderous regime.

The next chapter remains firmly rooted in German dance history and tradition. Gunhild Oberzaucher-Shuller's interesting (but repetitive) contribution shows how the dramaturgy of ballets and structure of companies were reorganized to suit the National Socialist agenda during, and just after, the Third Reich. The subtle transposition of national standards was meant to embed national consciousness into the organization of companies and the construction of performances. Oberzaucher-Shuller comments on the consistency of these practices after the war and identifies how heads of companies remained in their positions after the Reich fell, indicating that dance was considered apolitical and outside of possible criticism for political activity.

Stacey Prickett's article proposes a similar reflection on dance in America pre, during and post WWII. She highlights the events in American dance that contributed to the war mythology by reflecting on contributions from the many involved. The argument for dance to be taken seriously because it responded to conflict by abandoning subversive themes and fighting for the "common good" is a little unsatisfying. The thesis – that the war effort united political dance, and that it perhaps depoliticises rather than politicises dance – is an interesting but only partially revealed consideration.

The section *Dance, Rights and Wrongs*, suggests a slightly more critical edge. Naomi Jackson makes an impassioned, but somewhat clichéd, argument that dance is well placed as an art form to defend human rights. As Prickett hinted in the earlier chapter, Jackson reaffirms that while dance is a basic right, it is, as are other human rights, always in danger of exploitation. She suggests that it not only has the possibility but also the obligation to develop its active potential. The following two case studies, both commenting on war through the symbolism of the conflict in Iraq, reflect on ways artists tackle such responsibility. The choreographer Victoria Marks's reflections on her work *This is not Iraq* are fascinating, as she intelligently discusses her difficulties as a choreographer. She is faced with the conundrum of finding an overtly political voice that sits between didacticism and ideas and between specifics and generalizations about the human condition, as well as confronting the politics played out in a dance performance. Marks's musings on her process and the conflicting propositions that arise shed light on the discussions of Kershaw and Marcuse presented earlier by Kolb. The critical article by Suzanne Little on *Black Milk*, a choreography by the New Zealander Douglas Wright, also reflects back on Kolb's earlier discourse on Marcuse and engages with Adorno's famous dictum, 'no poetry after Auschwitz'. Little makes the case, at the expense of Wright's use of Abu Ghraib images in his work, that any re-construction of a known abusive event will inevitably succumb to aesthetic manipulation, thus losing its critical power and becoming at best, cathartic.

In the last section, *Market Forces*, Ramsay Burt provides a reflection on the 'overt' political work of Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker and the enigmatically oblique but nonetheless political work of Tino Sehgal. Burt, in the spirit of the book, has chosen performances that evoke current complexities of market manipulation through historical events of the 1960s. As the only contributor to heavily engage with poststructuralist theories, Burt undertakes to authenticate how De Keersmaeker and

Seghal 'create spaces in which to articulate political effects that are inadmissible within neo-liberal thinking' (262). He highlights how their "paradoxically passive" performance strategies enable a focus on the potential strength of action. Interesting also is that both these performers remain interdependent on neo-liberal institutional structures. Cleverly placed, the next chapter by Soo Hee Lee and Tatyana E. Byrne deconstructs the differences in institutional and political structure in Germany and the UK, pointing out the constant struggle for artistic viability when art/dance is treated as a political tool rather than an autonomous practice. The final chapter by Luke Purshouse was one of the most enjoyable reads of the anthology. Purshouse's style and argument is vivid, consistent and lively. He employs no platitudes and cleverly deconstructs Billy Elliot the film and Billy Elliot the musical in relation to Thatcher's England, clearly unravelling politics across dance, genre, class, social action and character.

How do these discussions further our understanding of the nexus between dance and politics? For contemporary readers studying dance history and politics, this might have been a relevant compilation providing a generous contribution to the discourse and research on the way that dance and politics can interact, as it may to those unfamiliar with German politics. However, there already exist many books on the themes of Wigman, dance in National Socialism and the Third Reich, as well as the New Dance Group, indeed by some of the authors represented here. Those hoping to gain some insight into how dance responds to politics on a wider scale will be afforded little satisfaction. Despite attempts to relay the 'actual' and the contemporary, there is something curiously old-world and unengaged with real-world politics and dance in this anthology: it is heavily weighted towards European history of a particular epoch. One wonders, for example, where does that leave South Africa and the prolific political choreographer Robin Orlin, urban dance groups such as *Mebros* from Brazil, or *Companie Kafig* from France? Now in the second decade of the 21st century, Western globalized politics under which dance and dancers travel and engage is shaped by ethnic and cultural interaction, as fragmented as that may appear. Moreover, dance and politics includes dance practices and practitioners that in modern times should be considered relevant for research and analysis, and their political concerns equal to European and imperialist interests such as the Iraq war and WWII. These may be my own preferences for consideration, which should not detract from Kolb's choice of subject however, her suggestion that 'this book fills an obvious gap in existing literature' (xiii) warrants reflection.

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