

## Critique Light? Or: What is Your Discourse? Confronting the Institutionalization of Theory in Contemporary Dance Education

By Gabriele Wittmann

It is fashionable. Everyone follows it. And everyone uses it: the term 'discourse'. It can be found in most of the mission statements of German dance education institutes. "Especially those that are experimentally oriented," says Constanze Schellow. And asks: What do the individual institutes exactly mean by it? The Latin word 'discurrere' is a paradoxical movement referring to a race in different directions. What does that imply for the field of dance? Some speak of "being able to contextualise their work", pointing to influences. But the philosopher critically asks, how far apart is this definition then from the neoliberal path of demanding self-marketing from everyone?

With this introduction, Professor Constanze Schellow invites the participants to the international round table Critique Light? Or: What is Your Discourse? Not only teachers such as Josefine Wikström from the Swedish DOCH (University of Stockholm), the founder of the study programme Dance Dissemination at the Centre for Contemporary Dance, Martin Sonderkamp (Hochschule für Musik und Tanz Köln, HZT Berlin), or the former deputy director of the Parisian Collège International de Philosophie, Boyan Manchev (University of Sofia), have been invited to report on their experiences and doubts, but also students and alumni.

But first back to the much courted term: Constanze Schellow finds the definition given by Michel Foucault rather helpful, for it implies neither the emergence of enigmatic meaning, nor the totality of what one says and does. Here, a discourse is more of a frame made of complex conditions. So what do we intend with theoretical classes in dance education? Do we want to give shape to a discourse in the sense of Foucault? Or offer frames for a structural disagreement? What can "critical" access still mean today?

### What authorship do I possess?

A student grants insights. Cathryn Humphreys from the School for Dance and Circus DOCH (Stockholm) first raises the question of the "academic as such": If theory only exists to promote the academic, is it then not counterproductive? "I don't want to perform the skill of reading," she says. So what can theory be within dance studies? "I am 22 years old. What authorship do I possess? Should I already have established my own clever practice?" she cynically asks, to then formulate something that everyone immediately recognises with a laugh: May I write in my own language? "Or do I have to employ theoretical terms and then use Google's translation tool to find out what they mean?"

## Does a discourse of practice exist?

"Intimacy" is the theme of Yuobing Luo from the Canton University in China, who studied solo dance at the HZT. She asks: "How should I be authentic or honest in my work, when I always feel a distance to it? I feel no closeness, no intimacy." In China, in contrast, it is not that important for the market which theory one follows. "In China, I am internally within my practice. Here in Germany, everything is so charged. I feel so burdened when I write." And she asks herself: "How can I as an artist form a discourse that is more inside of me? Does a discourse of practice exist? A sense-giving machine that has more to do with 'sensation', with feeling?"

Martin Sonderkamp is an artist who has taught at numerous institutions: SNDO, University of Istanbul, Linz, HZT Berlin, ZZT Cologne. Together with Katarina Kleinschmidt he teaches a different definition of "theory" in Cologne: Students move from a "sensation" through a "reflection" to a "conceptualisation". A theory, then, that is formed by practice. A proposal. But also a critique of the pressure exerted on institutions to produce artists who are successful in the field, "instead of just studying art". Doesn't this turn art into a mere "commodity"? A doubt that is shared by many in the room.

The student Johanna Ackva introduces herself as the child of a shepherd's family. Her mother regarded theory as a "form of liberation". It was a promise. But now she asks herself whether a theory "for DIN A-4 formats" is the right thing. "We are instructed to ask questions. And that can be paralysing."

## A place of distance

In contrast, the alumni Maayan Danoch from Tel Aviv gives an extraordinarily positive account of her beginnings: In the first semester at the HZT, she was invited to write a "biography". Then she was asked: What were your sources? "What should I have said, I didn't have any books yet," she recalls. "But then it slowly dawned upon me: Aha, that's the way I think. And I can trace that back. That was the critical practice: To have a place of distance, from which one can observe." Until now, she has been able to apply these skills in all contexts, theoretically and practically. But she does question the practice of writing texts on one's own: The students shared their texts with their fellow students only once they were completed. "Writing thus became a secluded process, performed alone." And she asks: "How can students write in a process – as a structure, as sharing in a rough stage?" And finally: What kind of theory input is requested? Why not invite an expert from outside the field, an astrophysicist, for example? Someone who joins in, with whom one can share questions and discuss concepts, without a goal in the back of one's mind. Otherwise theory would already be proscribed by the institution.

Constanze Schellow counters that she sees no problem in proscribing a certain theoretical frame. After all, the students will repeatedly be confronted with frames for

the rest of their lives. That may even be the solution and not the problem: "We are the institutional frame that is meant to enable developments," she considers, "we could also say: We offer a rigid, clear frame, which the students can then challenge." Because the generation of those currently teaching theory at German universities was formed by an "against" at the time. Nowadays, the theory of critique is taught. Perhaps it would be healthier if the student rebelled against the taught theory and developed themselves in friction with it? A colleague takes the thought a bit further. How can students be offered stimuli that they can make use of, despite the pressure of the Bologna timetable? "Maybe sometimes not everyone has to go through everything. Isn't a symposium conceivable in which students may participate, but do not have to?" Perhaps art academies offer orientation in this respect. Maybe one should let the students work for weeks on their own in the studio and only meet them for discussions.

### **Theory is no longer just a frame, but a substance**

Boyan Manchev, professor for solo dance at the HZT in Berlin and the University of Sofia in Bulgaria, asks: What does this current blurring of the borders between theory and practice stand for? As already researched with his colleague Bojana Kunst, he diagnoses that the "new ideology of collaboration" has become normative and in its quantitative boom of artists on the market has led to a "radical professionalization of art" – which in turn bears witness to the "crisis of professionalization" and the "crisis of labour" in general. Theory is today no longer just the frame for art, but its substance. On the one hand there is bodily effort, hard work, on the other a "quasi-religious 'discourse' that is to bring the truth in" – for today discourse is equated with 'truth'. 'Discourse' is the new currency for mediating and mediatizing practice. As a result, dance institutes are faced with the dilemma of having to teach artistic competence through technical skills, while the artist is simultaneously supposed to acquire multiple competences to be able to work in a networked way. Manchev puts the contradictions in a nutshell: "We see the ambiguity of critique and the critique of labour. But in our institutions we still see the discourse as a form of labour."

### **The language with which we speak about our work**

In three small groups, the audience then continues discussing with the initiators. At the first table, the philosophers are largely among themselves. And they agree that no-one wants to see "any piece on Deleuze's 'Body without Organs'" anymore. But how can discursive frames be established for studies? Is art a non-discursive practice? And: Is there even anything outside of discursive/non-discursive framings? And how much time does this practice take up? "When a student asks me about Deleuze, I cannot recommend an introductory booklet for a few cents," says Boyan Manchev, "it doesn't work that way." And he considers how this problem can be addressed in a constructive manner: Maybe – to speak with Deleuze – by conceiving discursive practices as practices of cleansing?

At the second table the themes are addressed from the practice in the dance studio. Already reading the texts poses a problem for international students. One of them is the language – and that applies not only to the choice between German and English. “The language you use in the studio is not the same one you use to speak about your work,” says Martin Sonderkamp, and asks: Is it possible not to have to translate first, but to respond in a direct physical way to the text? He gives an account of teaching experiments conducted together with the dance scholar Katarina Kleinschmidt: They work from both perspectives, “so that there is not an artistic work and afterwards a theoretical reflection. Both are continuously developed in parallel.”

Time is much too short and more and more questions are raised. For this reason, the international panel is to be continued by a study group dedicated to a methodical exchange among teachers conveying theoretical and reflective formats in artistic dance training. The aim is to establish a network. The student Johanna Ackva proposes in passing: “The term ‘discourse’ is in the wind all the time anyway. Why don’t we just try catching it?” An astoundingly simple thought. On the other hand: Wasn’t simplification part of the problem?

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