

DANCE AND PERFORMANCE IN DUCKBURG: Wir sind der Schnabel der Welt

Report by Martina Ruhsam

Workshop headed by: Franz Anton Cramer, Matjaž Farič and Ingrid Türk-Chlapek

It must first be said that this text conveys only a part of the discussion that took place during the event. Discussions were held in three small groups and the author was only able to follow the discussion of one group in more detail.

On the urgency of upgrading dance projects in decentral regions

“Dance and Performance in Duckburg. Wir sind der Schnabel der Welt” was the title of the event that Franz Anton Cramer, Matjaž Farič and Ingrid Türk-Chlapek dedicated to discussing the status of contemporaneity in decentral production contexts. Duckburg – the centre of the Donald Duck universe in the fictive U.S. state of Calisota – is to be understood as an arguably humorous allusion to an upgrading of the periphery. In the sense of such an upgrading, Cramer, Farič and Türk-Chlapek kicked off the event with the following hypothesis: Festivals and dance projects realised in decentral and rural areas can provide innovative stimuli, which can then in turn influence projects in hegemonic dance metropolises such as Brussels, Berlin or London.

The main focus of the event was therefore on linking the concept of “contemporaneity” with the localisation of projects in decentral, geographical contexts. That which is regarded as contemporary in the sense of progressive or backwards-oriented would then be less dependent on the point in time of a performance than on its geographical localisation, the initiators claimed, who then went on to detach the concept of “contemporary” from its connection to projects in large conurbations.

In her introduction, Ingrid Türk-Chlapek, who lives and works in Carinthia, gave an account of her cultural initiative “Tanzamt Klagenfurt”. According to her observations, the term “contemporary dance” has been used in Carinthia only since about 10 years. Prior to that, one instead spoke of “dance theatre”. But Türk-Chlapek pointed out that the claim that rural regions always lag behind is vehemently rejected. She questioned the meaning of the term “contemporary” and stressed the important status of contemporary dance in peripheral regions – also in regard to its model function for artistic practices and presentation forms in big cities.

After the introduction, the participants formed three small groups that discussed three questions:

1. What do we understand under “contemporary”?
2. Do discourses become established in rural regions with a delay or just differently?
3. Can strategies for dance developments in conurbations be extracted from the utopian potential that exists in rural regions?

The relationship between contemporary dance and social concerns

In small constellations, the meanings and aporias regarding the concept of contemporaneity as well as initiatives and impetus-providing projects in rural contexts were discussed, for example, the Burgenländische Tanztage founded by Liz King and its residency programme in Pinkafeld (Burgenland, Austria), where Liz King works with the local population and refugees. Artistic projects in decentral areas are inextricably linked to issues of funding policies. In this context, it is problematic when dance is reduced to social or political purposes and is deemed relevant only for these reasons. Although dance projects in small towns must be funded in a better way, it is a mistake to believe that dance initiatives should only be subsidised when they serve other purposes – for example, the integration of refugees, as one discussion participant pointed out.

Contemporaneity in contemporary dance: What does it include, what does it exclude?

- In one of the small groups, the term “contemporary dance” was defined as a plurality of approaches and practices developed in resonance with urgent and topical themes in politics and society.
- One participant said that she uses the term “contemporary dance” in the context of dance training to indicate that it is not a dance technique or a dance style such as ballet, modern dance, jazz or step.
- Another participant observed that several choreographers in decentral contexts no longer want to use the term “contemporary dance” because they have gained the impression that it has a more deterrent than inviting effect on the audience (according to the motto: “contemporary dance” is not for me, I don’t understand it...).
- This was contradicted by another participant working in a rural context who has experienced that the term attracted people because they didn’t know what it exactly meant. And that actually generated excitement and interest.
- One group argued: “If you have never driven a Mercedes, you don’t know the advantages of riding a bike. If you have never experienced the problems that are connected with technique and virtuosity, it is harder to appreciate certain performances that are not based on virtuosity.”
- In Berlin, the label “contemporary dance” hardly plays a role in the context of festivals or institutions, said one discussion participant who lives there. As far as funding policies are concerned, however, almost everything counts as contemporary dance.
- Another discussant said that in the GDR up until the 1980s, one did not speak of contemporary dance but used the term “Neuer Künstlerischer Tanz” (New Artistic Dance, NKT).
- What is certain is that “contemporary dance” does not designate an homogenous field and that the term feigns a coherence that does not really exist.

- One participant said that she had attended classes in Modern Dance during her education at the Palucca School (2001-2005). After completing her training, colleagues recommended specifying that she had been trained in “contemporary dance” in applications and requests.
- Who call themselves contemporary? And what is associated with it? Today, only few artists call their practice contemporary for artistic reasons. More often, the term is used because of structural and funding-political requirements. The discourse is only insufficiently able to subsume the diversity of practices, one participant pointed out. She was convinced that infrastructures and subsidies are, however, more dependent on discourse than on practice.
- Another participant pointed out the differences between the discussions on “contemporaneity” in fine art and in the field of dance/choreography. While that which is called “contemporary” in fine art is the subject of heated debates, there are hardly any discussions on what counts as contemporary in the performing arts. But at the same time, specific works are associated with the term “contemporary dance”.
- Matjaž Farič explained that contemporary dance developed with the emergence of democratic states and therefore implied all the problems of democratic processes such as decision-making, indecision etc. Just like democracy seeks to be global, contemporary dance wants to be global, although that is not the case. For otherwise that which is associated with contemporary dance would not be divergent in different geographical contexts (e.g. in France and Eastern Europe).
- One group proposed an “un-academic” definition of the term “contemporary dance”: “Contemporary dance is that which is taking place now and simultaneously.”

“All art has been contemporary” (graffiti on the Berlin Wall)
How can “contemporaneity” be delimited? Do we make a difference in dance between the 1990s and 2000s? Do we use the term to designate practices that deal more with bodily experiences and reaching certain bodily states than with representation? Does the concept of contemporaneity imply a transition from modes of presenting to the creation of situations, in which on the side of both the audience and the performers something can be experienced or examined? Are students in contemporary dance classes expected less to complete a specific training than to research certain thematic fields or questions? In regard to contemporary dance, does the expansion and testing of borders, the creation of intimate situations or ecstatic states come to mind? Does the term “contemporary dance” designate a certain radical change in aesthetics? These were the questions discussed in one group. A speaker of the group then conveyed the considerations on an ontology of contemporaneity to the other participants.

The relationship between centre and periphery

Contemporary dance performances created in small towns or rural regions can be more exciting than those in metropolises in which contemporary dance has become the mainstream. However, artistic works that take place on the periphery and away from great media attention are hardly visible in a broader context and therefore underrepresented. But conversely, it is also the case that large and expensive productions by contemporary choreographers (e.g. Boris Charmatz or Meg Stuart) are underrepresented in rural regions, because they can't be shown there for cost reasons. The term "contemporary" suggests that it is something keeping pace with the times. That in turn gives rise to the question whether what is happening in fringe areas lags behind new developments. However, this question expresses a kind of colonial power relation, one participant said. For colonial relations mostly also started with the colonisation one's own country, which was then grasped as the norm, while everything that deviated was deemed backward.

According to the observations of one participant, the term "contemporary dance" is strongly associated with the notion of high culture. Although the attempt is made to distance oneself from high culture, with which ballet is still associated, the term "contemporary dance" suggests a different form of "high culture" in his opinion.

In rural areas, the discourse on contemporary dance is usually limited to newspaper articles, whereby there is oftentimes only one local paper and a great dependency on the respective journalists writing about art or dance. As far as the audience is concerned, the advantage in rural regions is that there is no excess supply of culture, which is so characteristic of metropolises, and it can therefore be easier to win over an audience for certain events.

This is contradicted, however, by the concrete experiences of the discussion participants who have organised dance festivals in decentral cities and spoke about their difficulties in regard to audience effectiveness. One participant initiated a festival for contemporary dance in Galway, the only Irish-language town in Ireland in which no experience had been made with contemporary dance until then. Another participant organised the presentation of performances in rural areas of Spain and had to struggle with low audience figures. This prompted the question of how to address or communicate with the local population in order to arouse interest, and whether the term "contemporary dance" is helpful in this regard. The event marked just the start of an important, further-reaching discussion.

Since 2006, the Flota Institute has been organising the Front@ Contemporary Dance Festival in Murska Sobota (a town with around 12,000 inhabitants in eastern Slovenia). The festival was founded with the explicit aim of decentralising contemporary dance in Slovenia. Matjaž Farič, the artistic director of the festival, said that at the beginning hardly anybody came to the shows – although high-quality performances from Slovenia and abroad were presented. Only after he grasped the

targeted and continual communication with the local population as a crucial part of the festival organisation did the audience figures rise. Later, he even experienced an audience of 300 people in Murska Sobota, while only 30 people attended a comparable event in Ljubljana.

In general, this event encouraged the commitment to dance projects and festival organisations beyond the large metropolises. Since a large portion of time was dedicated to the exchange among the participants, the event was an important platform for exchanging experiences made by people working in decentral regions as artists and/or organisers. They left the groups with more self-confidence and, encouraged by paradigmatic examples of success, energised for upcoming projects in small town – beyond the hustle and bustle of the hegemonic art and culture metropolises. The realisation that others are struggling or have struggled with similar problems and have partially developed solution strategies marks an important moment in the challenging process of self-empowerment in fringe regions neglected by the media.

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