



PERFORMANCE
PHILOSOPHY

RESPONSIVE BODIES: TOWARDS AN ETHICS OF CONTEMPORARY DANCE

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One by one, the performers in Anna Halprin's *Circle the Earth: Dancing with Life on the Line* (1989), stepped forward and shouted: *I want to live!* Yet, a few months, or, in the best case, a couple of years later, all of them were dead. Exclusively performed by HIV and AIDS patients, *Dancing with Life on the Line* was part of Halprin's series *Circle the Earth*, "her signature statement about the dancer in everyone, collectivity, and health" (Ross 2007a, 318). Emerging from a workshop on Mount Tamalpais, north of San Francisco, the performance took place in the Redwood High School gymnasium in Larkspur, Marin County in 1989, at a time when AIDS was still a socially hidden and above all incurable disease (Ibid., 326). Not only did *Dancing with Life on the Line* become one of the first examples for the "AIDS dance" genre (Gere 2004, 32) and, as a form of artistic activism, raise awareness for the disease, at the private micro level, too, the performance had a revelatory character: Some of the parents in the audience realized for the very first time that their sons had HIV when they saw them dancing in front of their eyes (Ross 2007a, 326).

Far exceeding the already transitory character of any performance and almost mocking the notorious complaint about dance's ephemerality, *Dancing with Life on the Line* had a temporal community of dancers and audience members that was explicitly short-lived. This urgency added to the social activism and the uncovering function of the event and rendered the performance into an anticipated commemoration. Looking back from a perspective after the death of all the performers, their shouts of *I want to live!* already hinted at loss and parting and marked the looming bereavement of all participating dancers.

This death-relatedness, however, did not contradict Halprin's own view of the performance that she understood as a necessary element in a holistic process of healing. Distinguished from *curing*—the mere elimination of illness—Halprin's idea of *healing* also included a positive reference to diseases such as cancer and AIDS for which, according to the state of medical research at her time, 100% effective treatment was often or generally impossible. To address these conditions with the assumed healing power of dance, Halprin conceived

Dancing with Life on the Line as part of *Circle the Earth*, "a series of moving ceremonies and prayers in the tradition of a dance ritual" that linked holistic healing to the experience of being integrated into a community (Halprin, quoted in Ross 2007b, 157). On a poster for a second version of the performance in 1991 she described this experience:

For a time, the circle of death, isolation, ignorance and fear was broken; the circle of health, peace and trust was strengthened. A healing had begun. But healing is an ongoing process, not an event. There is still a crisis. There is still no cure for AIDS, for cancer, for war, for pain, for whatever may separate us from each other and keep our lives un-lived. We all want to live. And in some ways that means that we all have AIDS and we all have cancer. We all have war, doubt, struggles and pain. And only by crossing the lines that we draw between us, only by joining together in action, in feeling and with spirit, can there ever be an end to any of it. (Halprin 1991, n.p.)

Dancing with Life on the Line was a prime example for the effectiveness of dance as social action and the political dimension of contemporary dance (see Bennahum 2022). As such the two workshops and performances of 1989 and 1991 "not only erased the isolation and loneliness of terminal illness but turned a state of hiding into a moment of bold public declaration" (Ross 2007a, 326). With this publicness, the event highlighted the connection of performance, witnessing and responsibility: The audience members saw before their own eyes how vulnerable and doomed bodies presented themselves and thus became witnesses to their anticipated death. Bodies that would live on saw bodies whose lifespan would soon be cut short. In the simple process of watching and witnessing, the spectators became responsive bodies, and the mere fact that they would live on put them in an irrefutable position of responsibility.

In a nutshell, the example of Anna Halprin's *Circle the Earth: Dancing with Life on the Line* demonstrates the questions that confront an ethics of contemporary dance: How does an ethical responsibility arise in the situation of a performance and extend beyond the moment of dancing and of experiencing a dance piece? Based on but also going beyond the co-presence of moving and kinaesthetically responding bodies, ethics of contemporary dance address an extended audience and transcend the present moment of dancing into the past of ethical reflection and into the future of responsible action. What role do vulnerability, resilience, and non-identity play in terms of the temporal community of philosophers, dancers and spectators? How can we understand contemporaneity beyond shared time and presence so that contemporary dance can acknowledge the fragility and incompleteness of the past and unlock the potentiality of the future?

And how is this understanding of contemporaneity linked to ethical responsiveness in dance and dance reception?

These questions addressed the workshop *Responsive Bodies* held at the Freie Universität Berlin in the Cluster of Excellence EXC 2020 *Temporal Communities: Doing Literature in a Global Perspective* in summer 2021 (Schwan 2021). The idea for this workshop was born in 2019 as a small on-site event for German-speaking dance scholars with a particular interest in philosophical approaches to dance. Then the COVID-19 pandemic struck, and in the course of several postponements, the workshop evolved into a larger and international online event with an audience from China, India, Australia, the USA and many European countries. This workshop has now grown into the present issue of *Performance Philosophy*, with selected contributions from the Berlin conference and invited texts from other parts of the world, all of which relate philosophical connections of ethics and performativity to the materiality of moving bodies.

Responsive Bodies follows a deliberately broad understanding of dance based on the assumption that phenomena of dance are created in the interplay of movement perception and moving entities, not restricted to human bodies only, but including all creatures, objects, and substances. In this understanding, it is the phenomenological perspective through which movement is perceived as dance. When it comes to dance as human movement in time and space, the compilation looks at stage or concert dance as well as social dancing or dance partnering and even includes dance videos on YouTube and TikTok. This approach assumes perspectives on dancing that encompass spectatorship and the dancer's experience of moving, as well as the rich kinaesthetic transmissions between audience and dancers.

With regard to the aspects of temporal community, the issue adopts Giorgio Agamben's definition of the contemporary, unfolded in his introductory lecture of the course in Theoretical Philosophy 2006/7 at the Faculty of Arts and Design at the Università Luav di Venezia (Agamben 2009). Agamben interprets contemporaneity more broadly and disparately than the mere participation in a shared time. For him, contemporaneity is on the one hand afflicted by the potentiality of the future anticipated in dense moments of the present, the now. On the other hand, the idea of the contemporary is characterised by a constructed reference to the *arché*, to the idea of a beginning in the past whose "indices and signatures" are perceived "in the most modern and recent" (Agamben 2009, 50).

Working with a model of contemporaneity that is not limited to current phenomena is particularly helpful regarding the ethical dimension of dance. For contemporaneity in art and dance draws its awareness of the darkness in the present situation, its entanglement with suffering and injustice both in envisioning a better life in the future as well as acknowledging the unfulfilled promises of the past. It is this aspect of a necessarily discontinuous experience within current forms of dance that also enables the specifically contemporary dance aesthetics that are linked to the expression of non-identity, singularity, and disruption to replace outdated models of dance aesthetics such as virtuosity, self-expression, and uncritical subjection to norms of movement and bodily appearance. This radical embrace of the singularities of movement, its disfiguration, imperfection,

unpredictability, and unrepeatability also sharpens the research focus significantly: *Responsive Bodies* sees contemporaneity in dance as both an ethical and aesthetical prerequisite.

Responsive Bodies builds on existing approaches to dance ethics (Rothfield 2014; Ruprecht 2017; Schwan 2017; Bresnahan, Katan-Schmid, and Houston 2020; Whalen 2023). Yet, both the workshop and the present issue do not focus on propagating morally good dancing (Bannon 2018, Jackson and Shapiro-Phim 2008) or a “more humane dance culture” (Jackson 2022), but rather scrutinise the fundamental ideas that underlie such projects. Ethics in contemporary dance is therefore discussed as an aspect of philosophical ethics and combines ethical theory with the practice of bodily movement. Starting from this basic assumption, the six contributions approach the question of ethics in contemporary dance in a spectrum that ranges from the general to the particular. Firstly, questions of society and community, dance partnering, and intersubjectivity are discussed. The relationship between community and exclusion, particularly of Black dance bodies, is then analysed from an Afropessimist perspective and with a focus on theories of Black feminism. The issue concludes with an outlook on the potential of dance ethics in the digital space, focussing on new strategies of self-empowerment in video dance.

Raf Geenens (KU Leuven) opens the discussion with his reflections on choreography and social dance, which is understood here as a constitutive outside for theatre or concert dance. Without its embedding in communities, dance as an art form must deal with social and ethical questions from the artificiality of its own medium. These choreographic strategies are discussed using exemplary works by Bronislava Nijinska (1891–1972) and Tino Sehgal (*1976), both of whom have a keen awareness of the nature of dance as an artistic medium with a particular ethical dimension.

Ilya Vidrin (Northeastern University) delves into the question of what conditions, enables or prevents responsible knowing in dance partnering. He attempts to gain a clearer picture of how expectations of interacting inform the dynamics between dance partners and what, in turn, partners can actually achieve in and through their connection. Arguing not as a utilitarian interested in maximizing good *simpliciter*, but as a social epistemologist thinking about the contingent goods that are present in relation, Ilya is particularly interested in considering what features of interaction are necessary for maximizing the affordances of dance partnership.

Victoria Wynne-Jones (University of Auckland) scrutinizes the ways in which somatics as a normative system tends to promote homogenised, a-historical and so-called natural bodies. This ideology is contrasted with the concept of kinaesthetic queerness and the role it might play in de-naturalising somatics and somatic attention, with particular attention to the concept of intersubjectivity and its connective function. Using theories by Hannah Arendt and Emmanuel Levinas, the text analyses artworks by queer Indigenous performance artists Forest V. Kapo (Te Atiawa, Ngāti Raukawa) and Val Smith (Pākehā) as well as Pauline Boudry and Renate Lorenz (Berlin).

Mlondolozzi (Mlondi) Zondi (University of Southern California) addresses ethics of contemporary dance from an Afropessimist perspective. Through a reading of Nelisiwe Xaba’s dance work entitled *Sakhozi Says “Non” to the Venus* (2010) Mlondi maintains that the machinations of antiblack

capitalism co-opt all sides of the debate. The gesture of inviting African performers to dance in European museums as substitutes for repatriated African objects goes together with the act of white psychic rehabilitation and an attempt to redeem enduring European colonial violence.

Stefan Hölscher (Berlin) takes a closer look at current Black feminist identity politics in German theatre. Focussing on the video clip series *Colonastics* (2020) by Joana Tischkau, he analyses how Afro-German feminist theatre makers have reacted to white dominant culture in the recent years. Based on theories by Caribbean philosopher Sylvia Wynter, Stefan explores how responsiveness corresponds to aesthetic practices of theatre-making and thus work towards a more pluralistic society.

Juan Manuel Aldape Muñoz (Cornell University) unravels the ethical implications of blockchain dance tokens and how they reshape the dynamics of race in short dance videos. By examining two different choreographic initiatives, JaQuel Knight's work for Beyoncé and Jalaiah Harmon's *Renegade Dance* and its popularisation on TikTok, Juan Manuel shows how artists can monetise their work and bridge the gap between labour and circulation. The innovative legal and financial pathways of dance Non-Fungible Tokens (NFTs) enable Black artists to re-imagine and realise a post-extractive dance world and signal a transformative shift in aesthetic economies and the limits of choreographic copyright.

These six contributions are of course only the first steps on the way to an ethics of contemporary dance. Their compilation is still incomplete but also an important indication of the desiderata for future debates on dance ethics. These debates will need to discuss additional key topics, such as the questions of vulnerability and care, or an analysis of how vision, touch, and kinesthesia are connected to ethical responsibility in the context of dance training and performance, and in the political realm as a whole. The same applies to the idea of dance witnessing and how this invokes aspects of guilt and responsible commitment that exceeds mere empathy and leads to proper social action. In short, a thorough examination of the *conditio humana* in dance is still on the horizon, but with this issue the first steps have been taken. From there we can and need to move onwards and upwards.

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Biography

Dr Alexander H. Schwan is a dance scholar and theologian with a research focus on spirituality, religion, and ethics. He is the author of the book *Schrift im Raum. Korrelationen von Tanzen und Schreiben bei Jan Fabre, Trisha Brown und William Forsythe*, which was honoured with the Tiburtius Award in 2016. His current book project, *Theologies of Modern Dance*, researches theological implications in the works of modernist choreographers in Europe, Israel, and the US. He has been a visiting lecturer at the University of California Santa Barbara and has held visiting fellowships at UC Berkeley, Princeton University, and Harvard. His article "Queering Jewish Dance: Baruch Agadati" (*Dance Research Journal* 2022) was awarded an Honourable Mention for the Dance Studies Association's Gertrude Lippincott Award for the best English-language article in dance studies.

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