

The Bearleeners are dancing

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1 A piece of historic trivia: What went down in history as the 'Iron Curtain' was initially called the 'Iron Fence' by Winston Churchill during the Potsdam conference in 1945.

2 Alexandra Richie, *Berlin. Metropolis Fausta*, Vol. 2 (Grupa Wydawnicza Foksal 2021), 501.

3 *Treaty on the Final Settlement with Respect to Germany* signed in 1990 between the GDR and FRG and the four victorious powers who acquired a right to occupation of Germany in 1945 – USA, Great Britain, France and Soviet Union. The treaty formally ended WW2 by annulling the agreements written down in the Potsdam Treaty and guaranteed sovereignty to the united Germany.

THE WALL

In June 1963, two years after the Berlin Wall was built, John F. Kennedy landed in West Berlin with an official delegation. His visit was a much-needed PR push for the local government – affirming their close diplomatic and economic ties with the United States in the face of the Soviet-style communist bastion roaring literally just behind the fence.¹ As it sometimes goes in the theatre of history, his visit turned out to carry much more symbolic and political significance than had previously been presumed. According to the version of the story told by Alexandra Richie in her history of Berlin,² even though the US president was there to strengthen the morale of the West Berliners, it was their Eastern counterparts who touched his heart. When, after passing by Checkpoint Charlie and Brandenburg Gate, he climbed onto one of the wooden platforms next to the wall, he saw a group of East Berliners gathered to greet him regardless of the threat of political repressions. His speech delivered later that day contained the allegedly hand-written addition *Ich bin ein Berliner* (written phonetically), which crowned the speech emphasising Berlin's relevance in the fight against Communism, and which was met with a twenty-minute ovation from the citizens of West Berlin. Some decades later, another US American president would stand in front of Berlin's best-known gate and appeal to the leader of the USSR – Mr. Gorbachev – to “tear down this wall”. And indeed, the wall was to be torn down a few years later in somewhat chaotic circumstances to mark the actual end of WW2.³

4 In recent months Germany has seen an unprecedented rise to power on the side of far-right politicians. Robert Sesselmann became the first AfD district governor, elected to the post in his home region Sonneberg (Thüringen). Hannes Loth, also AfD, was elected mayor in Raguin-Jeßnitz (Sachsen-Anhalt). At the time of writing this text, elections are pending in Wittstock (Brandenburg) with Sandy Ludwig, a neonazi and AfD member, as one of the main candidates.

5 This text does not provide a space for an in-depth analysis of such political and social dynamics, yet some analysts point to a general sense of dispossession among former East Germans in the period of transformation (from communist centrally planned economy to capitalist free-market economy throughout the 1990s) as a possible source of increased fear of migrants in general. Yet what also seems relevant is the GDR agenda in regards to memory politics, which attempted to gloss over attitudes of the German people in the Nazi period and ascribed its crimes solely to Western capitalist Germany (Alexandra Richie, *op.cit.*, 447).

In 1991 the citizens of the newly re-united Federal Republic of Germany were debating which city would be most suitable to become a capital. Berlin won over Bonn, but it was a close run. Many Germans saw Berlin as the epicentre of all the most shameful political events in the country's history, and the city itself as too bohemian, too Prussian or even too much of a *Poland*. Scarred by several decades of troubled history, political turmoil, destruction and transformation, Berlin entered a new chapter of its own story that would be written by many nations, political factions, conflicting forces and interests, with the resonances of division still present thirty years on, mixed with the challenges of 21st century global socio-political and economic developments and crisis(es).

With the city becoming an iconic site of freedom thanks to the destruction of the Wall, it seems that “to be a Berliner” means to be engaged in, if not radical, than at least perpetual political struggle and search for identity at the intersections of worlds and stories. But the sense of freedom (or rather libertarianism) so often sold to both tourists and refugees/migrants/expats (choose your category) in the German capital has always been shaped by the political contexts of the moment. When in 2015–16 the so-called ‘refugee crisis’ unfolded, Germany received over a million people fleeing war, violence, poverty or climate catastrophe. The grand ‘humanitarian’ gesture of Angela Merkel’s government was read by many as a testimony that the German nation can rise above its xenophobic past and lead the global community at a time of crisis. It was not the first time in recent history that Germany had faced waves of refugees – in the late 1990s the Yugoslav war had caused many people to seek shelter and asylum here, not to mention the more gradual influx of Eastern Europeans or Turkish citizens who had been coming to Germany in search of work or better live opportunities, many of whom stayed for good. In 2022 yet another war led to a mass movement of Ukrainian people fleeing Russian aggression. On the one hand we witnessed people in Berlin and other German cities and towns getting mobilised to receive and help the refugees; on the other hand, in the aftermath of the biggest migration wave, in 2018, we saw the Alternative für Deutschland (AfD) – a far-right party – enter the German parliament for the first time, capitalising on fears and biases against the incoming refugees.⁴ With the significant rise of the far right in German politics in the last decade, it is often the former East German population that is associated with supporting neo-fascist rhetoric and politics, even though the majority of people that arrived in 2015–16 were located in the former West German states.⁵

In Berlin the resonances of division are present still today in the electoral choices of various district’s inhabitants, and further in the Brandenburg region. It is therefore important to problematize a rather victorious image of Berlin and Germany at large as a place/nation which overcame its troubled past and tore down the Wall, while articulating the complexity of the present that has emerged from that history.

I arrived in Berlin in 2012, although the city had never really been on my map of places to go. I remember my first visit to Alexanderplatz, which felt like the REAL city centre, and the sense of liberalism and

diversity it gave me when I first arrived. Over the last eleven years I not only finished school and started my freelance career, but also moved fourteen times, made friends, lost friends, made new friends, was lured into the party life to then sober up, got some relationship trauma along the way, was sick and depressed and then recovered, at least for the time being. I also engaged with the art community and the culture politics of the city to finally get my name on a doorbell and a rental contract, and then a German cat who I named after my grandfather. I was a barista, a waitress, a cleaner, worked in a hotel and as a swimming instructor, was a one-person catering service and a clothes-seller, tried myself in a role of an executive producer of a horror movie and even attempted to be a professional babysitter but with no success. At the moment, my work-life is divided between dancing for other choreographers, choreographing myself, organising events, writing and publishing texts and engaging in volunteer work in cultural politics.

I have observed changes of rhythms and the transformation of the city's fabric. I have been amazed and heartbroken, rejuvenated and exhausted. And from this vantage point of a more mature relationship with Berlin I would like to further investigate how both the gains and the struggles of the last few decades after German unification affect people's personal lives, and also the field of the free dance scene which I made my home. I would like to look closely at the challenges and opportunities that may lay ahead of the artists and citizens of the German capital, and allow myself to name some troubles and imagine the ways out, towards the future.

TO DREAM

I am lucky to have some older Polish migrant friends who have been here for decades, and who sometimes share their memories of the mythical Berlin of the 1980s and 1990s. Spacious, *altbau* apartments with unbelievably cheap rent, squatting, self-organisation and a sort of general anarchy fill those stories about Berlin shortly after the fall of the Wall. They still constitute a fundamental identity feature of Berlin – *poor but sexy*⁶ – which draws people seeking to escape capitalist dominance and middle class lifestyles. Everyone is an artist here, or so they say.

This is my quest, to follow that star...

No matter how hopeless, no matter how far...⁷

At the very beginning of the 1990s, many buildings and sites across the city were deserted, neglected or unused and this of course provided artists, social and culture workers with opportunities to engage with the revitalisation of those sites, as well as with the development of new artistic platforms, communities and aesthetics. Pfefferberg, which would become an important place for the emerging free dance scene, was a former brewery on Schönhauser Allee which, at some point during the existence of the GDR, was thought of as a place for

6 The famous phrase was first coined by Berlin's mayor Klaus Wowereit, more about the context and his political legacy can be read here: www.theguardian.com/cities/2014/sep/11/poor-but-sexy-not-enough-rise-fall-berlin-mayor-klaus-wowereit.

7 *The Impossible Dream*, from *Man of La Mancha*, lyrics by Joseph Darion.

8 You can listen to it here: www.soundcloud.com/sophiensaeleberlin/sets/tanztage-berlin-podcast.

9 See www.sashawaltz.de/ueber-sashawaltz-guests/.

10 See www.christoph-winkler.com/texte/ich-will-dem-tanz-etwas-zumuten/.

11 See www.toula.de/en/menschen/.

a new culture centre. The project was never realised until 1990–94 when the first artistic performances and activities took place in the building. There, one of the most iconic figures of our field, a one-woman-institution, Barbara Friedrich started her work with and for the emerging new dance scene. As she recalled in her interview about the history of *Tanztage*,⁸ of which she was a founder and the first curator, dance and choreography were not much present on the city stages, apart from ballet performances, and any sort of attempt at a career in contemporary dance was a risky business. Yet, regardless of the risk, new, more experimental dance practices were being developed with choreographers seeking to liberate dance (once again) from its subservience to music, exploring the intersections of movement and text, and inviting theory and movement research, as well as somatic (self)expression. In her interview, Barbara talked about one special aspect of that opening of dance as a practice and an ideological formation – about the freedom of reception and interpretation. Not only did dance practitioners find some of the early choreographic proposals difficult or even bad, but the artistic proposals were often dividing audiences and critics, sparking much discussion and polemics. Building of the new community of artists, producers and audiences carried a utopian motivation stemming from seeing dance not only as an artistic, removed-from-life form of self-expression, but also as a tool of socialisation, relationality and community building.

In those fruitful 1990s, many dimensions of the Berlin dance scene emerged: There was the newly founded *Sasha Waltz and Guests Company*, which over the years acquired access to infrastructure, and to the international community of elite choreographers. In 1996, Waltz's iconic work 'Allee der Kosmonauten' premiered in Berlin, simultaneously launching the company's new space as a site for contemporary dance in the city – *Sophiensaele*. As it says on the company's website:

*Within a very short time, the sophiensaele filled an important gap in Berlin's cultural landscape and today, (20) years after its founding, it is one of the most important freely producing theatres in Europe.*⁹

The recognition of Waltz's choreographic oeuvre was confirmed by appointing her and Jochen Sandig as a part of the *Schaubühne's* team of artistic directors in 1999. In later years, the company would find its home in *Radialsystem* next to *Ostbahnhof* and it remains one of the most successful and internationally renowned German dance companies. At the same time, choreographers educated in the former GDR such as Christoph Winkler were developing their artistic language. Winkler's experimental choreographic proposals, thematic and technical openness when it came to the notion of dance, secured him a strong position on the free dance scene, but that relative strength remains dependent on application writing and time-limited grants like the Berlin Senate's *Konzeptförderung*, as Winkler himself described in an interview with dance critic Sandra Luzina.¹⁰ In 1997, another contemporary dance ensemble *cie. toula limnaios*,¹¹ founded by Toula Limaïos and

Ralf R. Ollertz moved from Brussels to Berlin by invitation of the Akademie der Künste. Working between Brussels and Berlin, Meg Stuart founded her company *Damaged Goods* three years earlier, and together with the other choreographers I mentioned above, continues to work and offer jobs to numerous dancers and associated artists, as well as enjoying loyal audiences and critical acclaim.

These are of course more 'visible' examples of what was going on back then; it should perhaps be mentioned that there were many artists and non-artists, both German and migrant and whose names I don't know, who contributed to the growth of the scene. Over the last decades, Berlin has become home to dance artists from all over the world, and its internationality stands for one of its biggest strengths. Such an international community of highly motivated and often highly educated people still faces tremendous obstacles to making a stable living from freelance artistic work in Berlin. The artist often finds themselves in the position of a travelling agent, continuously searching for co-productions, residencies or scholarships; a sense of being at home or opportunities to not work, to rest, or have a personal life are scarce and disproportional to the amount of proposals and projects that are generated annually by the artistic community of the free scene. Today, the project can take various shapes and forms, and artists are mastering how to create something out of relative nothing (*just* the human capital and their own investments) – and alongside the hundreds of performances produced each year, there are symposia, sharing formats, magazines, workshops, classes... Encompassing the richness of Berlin's dancing is a task yet to be fulfilled, and one of the goals of the next work phase of Access Point Tanz, which aims to draw up a map of dancing occurrences in the city beyond the usual spaces and occasions.¹² Currently dance is present on too many stages to count or visit,¹³ and is finding its way into institutions that had not previously shown an interest in dance, e.g. Haus der Kulturen der Welt under director Bonaventure Soh Bejeng Ndikung and his team, including Atabey Mamasita – a dancer and curator who made space for the Bullerengue Circle to find its home in the HKW, as well as Marie H el ene Pereira, who is responsible for curating performative practices.

The sheer amount of happenings and proposals, as well as the continuous movements of the people working in the field, makes it at times difficult to really grasp what the free dance scene is, what are its communities, and how they relate to each other. In an interview conducted by the Sophiensaele's current dance curator Mateusz Szymanowka with Inge Koks – a Tanztage curator in the years 2006–07 – Inge emphasised her admiration and respect for the politicisation of the Berlin dance scene.¹⁴ This politicisation can be understood in terms of the methodologies used and content of the artworks produced in the city (an aspect significantly weakened in the art field governed by neoliberal principles) but also, and even more so, as in the context of the mentioned podcast, in terms of the ongoing dialogue and cooperation between political representatives and the people and organisations working in culture politics, specifically focusing here on the

12 A database of historic importance and interest to our free scene, developed in the first years of the Tanznacht festival, can be found here: www.tanznachtberlin.de/tanznachtberlin2000/startgruppen.html.

13 But please try – a comprehensive list is provided here: www.tanzraumberlin.de/tanzlandschaft-berlinspielstaetten.

14 You can listen to the interview here: www.soundcloud.com/sophiensaeleberlin/tanztage-berlin-podcast-08-inge-koks.

15 Open to all professionals working in the field of contemporary dance and choreography in the city: www.ztberlin.de/en/mitgliedsantrag/.

16 Partners associated in the Tanzraum Netzwerk (last updated 2020): ada Studio Berlin, Constanza Macras | Dorky Park, fabrik Potsdam, HALLE TANZBÜHNE BERLIN / cie. toulala limnaios, HAU Hebbel am Ufer, Hochschulübergreifendes Zentrum Tanz Berlin, LaborGras, lake Studios Berlin, Mime Centrum Berlin, Mobile Dance e.V., PURPLE – Internationales Tanzfestival für junges Publikum, radialsystem, Sasha Waltz & Guests, Sophiensaele, Staatsballet Berlin, Tanzfabrik Berlin e.V., Tanzforum Berlin, Tanz im August, TanzTangente, TanzZeit e.V., Uferstudios, Zeitgenössischer Tanz Berlin e.V.

development of the free dance scene. The ‘freedom’ of such a scene should be understood as a workfield differentiated from that of the *Staatstheater* model, which operates mostly on a repertoire-basis and offers stable employment. The free scene would be better described by the Polish phrase ‘wolna amerykanka’ (free American way), implying not only self-entrepreneurship but also deregulation and a work market with a highly competitive character. Another significant difference between these two models for organising a performing arts scene is the financial basis: an average *Staatstheater* in Berlin has the same annual budget as the entire free scene, comprising a few thousand artists and non-artistic collaborators, dozens of venues and self-organised spaces, and hundreds of artistic productions per year. Furthermore, with the performing arts dominated by drama theatre and opera, which are closer to the hearts of the upper social classes, other artforms and aesthetic experiments have plenty of space to develop but not as much infrastructural support or recognition to fully establish themselves as a counterweight to the state theatres, philharmonies and fine art museums. Against this background, it seems curious that what has been ‘liberating’ in the development of contemporary dance (in its more conceptually-turned direction), namely working with language, text and theory, seems to have led to the visceral nature of dance, its non-linguistic autonomy, being sacrificed for the sake of fitting into the Western art world paradigm, and capturing the cultural imagination of the people with some financial capital. This enables dance to be presented in galleries and museums, but usually in a way that makes the dancer’s body seem less vital or not much disruptive or critical of the immobility of the artworks.

Regardless of what one may think about the state of dance in Berlin, or any particular aesthetic, or the political exhaustion of choreography in the city, it is important to historicise the scene’s development and try to understand the forces that shaped it and the struggles which brought about its current state. As the scene and the international contemporary dance market grew in the 1990s, demands were voiced to stabilise working conditions, provide educational and funding opportunities, and form a common front to represent the interests of such a multifaceted field in the realm of cultural politics – both on a local and a national level. In 2000, the Zeitgenössischer Tanz Berlin registered association (ZTB e.V.) was established to represent people working in Berlin’s independent dance scene. It operates on a membership basis¹⁵ and the electable board of members changes every two years as a result of the General Members’ Assembly. According to its statutes, the association’s main goal is to ensure the political representation of the scene and to further develop and strengthen its heterogeneity – both in artistic and socio-economic terms.

In 2004, ZTB e.V. became one of the founding members of the Tanzraum Netzwerk which was established to provide a space for dialogue and cooperation between different venues, organisations and institutions involved in dance production and distribution in Berlin.¹⁶ A year later, Tanzbüro – an umbrella institution for cultural politics in

the free dance scene – was set up to connect and work with the various associations and partners mentioned above, as well as to act in direct communication with the Senate Department for Culture and Community (Senatsverwaltung für Kultur und Gesellschaftlichen Zusammenhalt) and the political representatives of the city's parliament. The scene's self-organisational activities bore another fruit in the shape of the first autonomous centre for higher education in dance and choreography – Hochschulübergreifendes Zentrum Tanz (HZT), which was to have a tremendous impact on the Berlin dance scene in the years to come. The school is based in the Uferstudios – itself a significant project of dance's structural development and a hub for many dance organisations and events.

The development of a strong network of cooperation between various actors in the field led to the launch of the Round Table Dance, bringing the dance scene together with political and administrative representatives for a year-long process of conceptualising the future of the scene. Over the course of 2018, aspects such as infrastructure and work spaces for dance, research and mediation, internationality and networking, a funding system for dance, accessibility and diversity, were discussed and worked on. As a result of further lobbying, along with the information and protest campaigns organised by ZTB e.V., among others, seven modules/projects were implemented in pilot- or conceptual phases, including the Tanzpraxis scholarship and TanzArchiv Berlin or Access Point Tanz. The possibility of an independent institution for dance – *Haus für Tanz und Choreografie* – is also on the table, currently conceived of as a centre for bridging rather than centralising the many flows, bubbles and scenes that together constitute the free dance scene in Berlin.

The part of the story I am trying to narrate here is by no means the whole story, not even half, for Berlin has been a home to many dancing communities, many of which find ways to function without public art funding, such as members of the urban dance scene or dance groups practising forms not (yet) regarded as 'contemporary dance'. The umbrella term 'contemporary dance' itself presupposes a particular rather than universal take on what constitutes a dance culture or practice. Following the historical timeline of Western modernism, it denotes a spectrum of practices often based on material generated by dancers pursuing somatic explorations, movement research and compositional improvisation, within the conceptual frame proposed by the choreographer. The anti-narrative and often anti-technical approach to dance renders many forms and legacies naive and belated, and drifts away from an understanding of dance as an autonomous language of expression. This is reflected, at times, in difficulties with seeing, or working in, exciting, moving and memorable dance performances on the city's stages (unless they are guest performances). The reasons, I believe, are complex, for it is not only the way choreographers are educated, or ideologically formatted by market forces. It seems to me the present difficulty in generating an original and dance-strong choreographic proposals can be ascribed to the fact that the currently

17 The title of a project by Jared Gradinger, who planted some dead trees in the Uferstudios yard. They have now become a small ecosystem: www.jaredgradinger.com/impossible-forest.

18 In the particular geopolitical context I am writing about.

prevalent conditions do not facilitate any long-term or continuous modes of working with dancers, or a development of a consistent and in-depth dance practice – as was still the case in the 1990s, when the companies mentioned above were established. Furthermore, the divorcing of art and craft, which occurred over the last centuries in the Western European context, poses a challenge when it comes to defending dance as a field that is (should be) unequivocally open to all bodies and movements, while also requiring years of practice and knowing one's craft. Additionally, recent re-discoveries of the politicality of dancing, its community-reproducing powers, and the joy and spirituality of dance practices often occur by inviting artists, and engaging with traditions and techniques, from outside the Anglo-Saxon and Western European culturesphere, yet the practitioners of such dancing traditions have limited access to resources and a limited presence, which awaits reform, in regard to what we frame as the contemporary dance scene. We are all still limited by the numerous exclusions and biases that operate within the dance scene, and what we need, I think, is to find ways of equal cooperation and mutual recognition, so dance's contemporaneity can acquire a new, more politically and artistically potent dimension.

THE IMPOSSIBLE FOREST¹⁷

During the Covid-19 pandemic, cultural production went into a standstill (for a moment) to restart again the (over)production of content, this time in a physically distanced or digital manner. Certain amounts of reskilling and reinventing of ourselves or dance practices occurred with the help of national/local funding assistance and special scholarships offered to artists. Many people received public support, also for the first time. Throughout the pandemic, even though theatres were closed and many stage productions and tours cancelled or rescheduled, plenty was happening on the free dance scene. Although there was perhaps an excess of online proposals, formats of content-sharing, and coming-together, many artists benefited from the halt to invest their time in research or developing their practice. Yet, the majority of those projects were instantaneous or short-term – as were the subsidies. The pre-pandemic exhaustion was replaced with a new kind of fatigue caused by overproduction and overwork. At best, the shock, turbulence and paradoxical rest opportunities for those in the dance scene might have inspired some reflection on our conditioning as working subjects, human beings and citizens of Berlin. Like other Berliners, some of us lost jobs and loved ones, were ejected from apartments or faced rising rents and living costs, some got sick, some became depressed – questions of belonging and of support structures available to us became urgent and the answers were sometimes upsetting.

The career models mostly available to artists nowadays¹⁸ constitute what Annelies van Assche describes in her book *Labor and Aesthetics in European Contemporary Dance* as 'an every-person-

for-themselves environment'.¹⁹ The performing arts market based on festivals, curatorial programs, open calls and project applications is a form of a very elaborate and bureaucratically virtuous race for scarce resources, in which the criteria for success are as complex as they are obscure. You may ask: *But where is the love and joy?!* And yes, we will get there, but first we must dismantle the oppressive working models and attitudes. We should perhaps start by looking at the causes and dimensions of precarity, in the cultural sector and across the global work markets. Flexibilisation of employment, imperative of self-entrepreneurship and competitiveness characterise the work environment for many artists and are attended by the general instability of having limited access to social benefits, affordable housing, or other structures of support, which in turn makes it harder to maintain steady personal relationships. Considering the cost of dance education and the investments required, both financial, and personal, as in innumerable hours of unpaid labour, to make work possible, access to such a career is largely limited to those who can rely on family support, an inheritance, or some other kind of second income to balance the budget. Choice of 'becoming a dancer' was rarely in history motivated by economic incentives. Settling for less in terms of economic and social security is often seen to be compensated for by the actual and/or supposed benefits that come from doing what one loves to do or *playing* for a living. However, considering dance makers' precarious situations, dependency on funding bodies, and subjection to requirements for themes and methods framed by programmers and sponsors, it becomes clear that the artist's freedom is very much conditional and their fortunes fickle. Furthermore, the self-referential and self-centred narratives required of contemporary dance artists significantly dilute any potential for creating collectivising experiences or communication streams beyond their own bubble, not to mention performing any resonant political gestures or invocations. The atomisation of ways in which we perceive and articulate our lived realities is entangled with the paradoxical standardisation and domestication of forms of expression under the paradigm of identity politics and the contemporary art world's high court of coolness, which fetishises difference while neutralising dissent. Artists, once seen (romantically) as outcasts, tricksters, storm-bringers, are now obliged by the funding and distribution structures to aim for public approval and consent to the neoliberal diffusion of their gestures of resistance for the sake of international career and social-media hype. Nonetheless, attempting a career in dance should be also seen as a positive choice. In my own artistic work, after years of dance training and writing practice, I am motivated by a strong conviction about the social, political and spiritual significance of dancing for human cultures and the individuals within them. Contrary to the widespread scepticism regarding the socio-economic relevance of dancing as a profession, I think that it is exactly its 'irrelevance' that marks its political potential for opposing utilitarian, market-driven and product-oriented work ideologies and power relations. On a rather utopian note, I would like to think that we in fact need more dancers, not less, and the growth of the community

19 Annelies van Assche, *Labor and Aesthetics in European Contemporary Dance* (Palgrave Macmillan 2020), 14.

of people whose work involves dancing would mark for me the healing of our society and its reorientation towards restoring the balance of ecosystems and economies. I try to maintain some hope that, just as the impossible forest is growing beautifully out of dead trees in the Uferstudios' yard, the perpetual exhaustion undermining dance workers, and societies at large, driven by the necropolitics of today's global governance, will fertilise the ground and produce a planetary transformation, which will mobilise and rejuvenate a multitude of the living against the prevalent relational models of late capitalism. Dance can become one of the techniques for such a transformation, but for that to happen the ways of dancing must themselves be liberated from neo-liberal aspirations.

Our struggle then must begin with the reappropriation of our body, the revaluation and rediscovery of its capacity for resistance, and expansion and celebration of its powers, individual and collective. Dance is central to this appropriation. In essence, the act of dancing is an exploration and invention of what a body can do (...). From dance we learn that matter is not stupid, it is not blind, it is not mechanical but has its rhythms, its language, and it is self-activated and self-organising. (...) Since the power to be affected and to effect, to be moved and to move, a capacity that is indestructible, exhausted only with death, is constitutive of the body, there is an immanent politics residing in it: the capacity to transform itself, others, and change the world.²⁰

In Berlin, the dance field has expanded significantly over the last decades. It must be acknowledged that the professionalisation of the dance sector has brought new funding tools, infrastructures and opportunities, but it has also changed ways of dancing and thinking about dance. Now, not only the cultural and financial start-up capital matters, but also the ability to fit in and follow the rules of the work market, even if this market is highly deregulated and does not provide basic social security structures or *futurability* in general. What my colleagues from the Berlin scene recall with nostalgia – the sense of community, of doing something together with people you know – is precisely what made it possible to initiate the structures and concepts that now hold the scene. There is sometimes an underlying complaint accompanying those memories about the young generation and their ignorance of those achievements and the structures of culture production, which prevents them from continuing the work of older generations and securing the future for the entire scene. Thanks to my four years on the board of the ZTB e.V., I have learnt much about those pioneers' dreams and initiatives, but have also been confronted with numerous challenges that Berlin dance workers face today and a certain exhaustion with specific ways of thinking and doing work in cultural politics. I believe it is certainly not only about the young generation striving for a better understanding of the role their predecessors played in forming the scene. The older generation, and political representatives, must

acknowledge the scale of transformation that global economies have undergone and how it affects the social realities in which younger choreographers or dancers try to launch their careers. For my generation of Berlin-based choreographers, careers such as those of Sasha Waltz or Meg Stuart are unimaginable (okay... very, very hard to imagine) in view of the current work opportunities and prospects, and the fact that the number of dance professionals has grown exponentially over the last decades.²¹ Taking all that into consideration, it seems to me that the intergenerational dialogue poses one of the biggest challenges for the scene and requires a caring yet sober perspective on what has changed, our conditioning, and how we can further negotiate and articulate our positions and needs in a common struggle.

*(t)he most generous subsidy to the arts comes from the artists themselves, in the form of unpaid labour.*²²

When in 2022–23 members of the ZTB board and associated colleagues were looking for candidates for the new board,²³ we approached both established and less established dance workers; the majority responded with ‘no’, due to a lack of time and capacity. Even though I understand their point of view, I want to lament for a bit on the difficulty of setting any other space of struggle beyond caring for one’s personal career – this in itself seems to be a realisation of neoliberal politics even if it is simultaneously self-care. With this remark, I would like to draw attention to those who work voluntarily for the dance community, even though the freelance (artistic) work model doesn’t promote any unionising or collectivising efforts, nor does it champion selflessness of any kind. The majority of people I have met over the years who work in cultural politics, community projects or peer support formats in Berlin are women²⁴ who work for free or overwork for relatively modest remunerations. The division between reproductive and productive labour and their visibility, both on the level of personal work routines and the macro-scale of the workings of the free dance scene, demands a critical reform. Statistics show that the gender pay gap and gender-based privilege are still unresolved problems in the German art world.²⁵ Dance (though not choreography), being a traditionally feminised profession, is home to all the gender stereotypes and tolerates the unpaid or badly paid work of mostly female-identifying, dancers or non-artistic workers such as producers. This is often, though never openly, and sometimes perhaps unconsciously, motivated with the disregard for their work seen as the essentialized work of love, care and self-realisation. Moreover, the general self-serving attitudes of workers and lack of a lasting support network or formats which could challenge the predominant ways of producing dance may result in the growth of the scene but not necessarily its development in line with the egalitarian, green and feminist principles so often asserted on posters, banners and in the evening programs.

21 I don’t intend to advocate for a dance company as a perfect model for working in dance, but rather to voice my personal desire for more opportunities to actually decide how to develop an artistic practice, and what infrastructures can be built to support one’s work and community. The economic transformation has resulted in limiting the possibilities for a (long-term) career in choreography, while the social and cultural start-up capital, migration background, skin colour, religion, bodily normativity all play a role in establishing or not establishing one’s career in the independent dance field.

22 Katja Praznik, *Which side are you on? On Understanding Art as Labour and the Potential of Collective Organising of Art Workers*, in: *What side are you on. Ideas for Reaching Fair Working Conditions in the Arts* (IETM Publication 2022), 8.

23 A short update: The new board was elected on the 19th of June 2023.

24 Here I opted for a binary-based word to mark the historic division of labour.

25 According to data published earlier this year by the Federal Statistical Office, the gender pay gap in culture and the arts amounts to 30% (!), with the average pay gap across all professions being 18% nationally. Source: www.instagram.com/p/CrQUIjZl5GU/.

26 Sergio Bologna, *We Can't Leave the Idea of Freedom to the Far Right!*, Angryworkers.org, Dec 10, 2021.

27 Bojana Kunst, *Making temporal kinships: Beyond the project, in: What side are you on. Ideas for Reaching Fair Working Conditions in the Arts* (IETM Publication 2022), 18.

28 "From the perspective of performance, making kin means going beyond the performance group working on the performance or beyond the very individuality of performance work. It is about opening up to how performance is enmeshed in the social fabric, and how it is weaved together through many different mutual obligations. It is working towards something but it does not belong to the project time, because in this working towards, the relations are re-arranged, the spaces inhabited differently, and time is plentiful. In this sense, performance lingers inside the temporal kinships with the present, because the work in performance belongs to the maintenance of relations and not the development of the new." (B. Kunst, op.cit.).

*Individuals who think of themselves as independent beings, who don't need anyone, who base their existence not on relationships with others but on individualism, are precisely those who lose their freedom to a large extent, especially in employment relationships: they negate solidarity, community and mutual help and find themselves the objects of the most unbridled exploitation because, as individuals, they have the weakest position in the market.*²⁶

The post-pandemic disappointment with the lack of any significant change in terms of how we work have created fertile ground for more organised resistance. A/The process of overcoming systemic oppression must then certainly involve a deeper understanding of the complexity of the dance scene, yet it cannot be divorced from the broader consideration of social and political struggle in Berlin. Furthermore, what seems crucial in transforming the power narratives is to present the dance field not as individual success stories and numbers in theatre statistics, but by narrating and making visible the labour processes and the entire ecologies that make the free dance possible in the first place. In her recent text, Bojana Kunst calls for artists to divest from engaging with the future, understood as a capitalist imperative dictating methods in the arts and the temporality of projects, and to sit with the present instead. This does not imply doing more art projects concerning the ongoing social, political or environmental struggles, but rather taking a closer look at how our work is conceived of and what it in fact produces. Such a focus on the nowness of the projective occupation might in turn bring some more criticality when it comes to the (re)production mechanisms of the art market and lead to an articulation of other forms of creating that do not necessarily conform to the projective horizon and the dullness of application writing and their evaluation.

*In my understanding, performance is also a micropolitical and embodied experimentation with temporality, a daily continuous process of rearrangement and redistribution of collective, collaborative, and relational desires, a continuous re-creation of the common.*²⁷

This somewhat complicated statement points to a complex but rather obvious reality of working in the performing arts, which is often forgotten or blurred for the sake of individual growth, namely the collaborative character of the work we do. The whole 'village' is needed to generate one performance, and both the creative and non-creative labour in such processes should be valued equally. The acknowledgement of the interdependence at play in the production of, e.g., dance work is reflected in productions in which dancers are (finally!) credited as co-choreographers and in which producers, costume designers, musicians etc. are invited on stage to take a bow with the rest of the team. These gestures mark a shift towards the more just articulation of the dynamics of work processes and more responsible engagement with the micropolitics of the workplace. But as Kunst writes, the *temporal kinships*²⁸ should be

constituted beyond the singularity of an artwork or an artistic team and encompass the entire ecosystem of work, to allow an understanding of how the individual projects are entangled with the social fabric and maintenance of relationships between peers. These multiple relations and interdependencies between various actors in the field constitute a base for the performing arts to thrive, and as such they require recognition and protection far more than singular artistic productions or festivals. That could indicate a need for an intensified efforts to present the free dance scene through such an eco-systemic lens and insist on the redistribution of resources among all its actors. What often comes to mind as a solution for promoting sustainability is broadly understood as de-growth, which in performing arts could mean fewer productions and more research-oriented funding, or financial support structures that operate independently of the project framework. It could also mean more affordable workspaces, more variety when it comes to the artists presented on stage, and divestment from star culture and international career models towards more support for local scenes and community building. This of course is easier said than done, with many of us not only coerced into a currently available working paradigm and thus endlessly reproducing it, but also due to the performing arts scene's ideological investment in the idea of transnational impact, cooperation and exchange that often means a lot of travelling and talking but not necessarily building of alternatives in common.

And last but not least, I would like to mention another pressing problem not only for the dance scene, but also for society in general, which was revealed through the pandemic – the mental health crisis, which seems to be deeply connected to the weakening of social bonds and inter-species relations. The aforementioned atomisation of experiences, structural precarity and racism, irresponsible drug and alcohol consumption, lack of life and work security, and climate catastrophe are all part of the very complex landscape across which mental health struggles unfold. The difficulty of accessing public psychological and psychiatric care as well as the structural biases that persist within it are only a few of the prescient conditions that demand action and change. The dance scene as a workplace faces an immense challenge in addressing these issues and finding ways of supporting its people rather than exacerbating their mental health crises. The very culture of work, along with the social conditioning of the working people, is itself a source of physical and mental suffering and demands critical examination. One of the recent initiatives of which I was a part and which attempted such a critical yet future-oriented analysis of the free dance scene was the AG Work Culture, which after two years of collective work released a free digital and print booklet *How to (make) dance in Berlin. A toolbox for a better work culture in the independent dance scene.*²⁹ The booklet stands as a first step on our way to establishing better conditions for work, but also to re-thinking the very reasons and ways in which we do dance, and how we support each other in that ultimately shared struggle.

29 The booklet can be viewed here: www.online.fliphtml5.com/twvnx/gngm/#p=1.



© A SCREENSHOT FROM THE VIDEO CLIP SHOWING THE PERCENTAGE OF BERLINERS WHO VOTED IN FAVOUR OF EXPROPRIATION.

LEAN ON ME ³⁰

According to the study conducted within the frame of the Round Table Dance in 2018, there are around 2400 dance professionals active in Berlin's independent scene. To that number, hundreds of non-dancer employees must be added (producers, dramaturges, educators, mediators, curators, technical crews, etc.) which together with the audience members constitute the social landscape of the scene. Over the years, working groups and collectives have come and gone, bringing the scene closer to the values we all claim to support such as equality, autonomy and disability justice. One recent project is Fortuna, a former casino in Berlin Neukölln, which was taken over by dance artists and producers and made a rehearsal space, meeting place, a venue, and a place for studying together and exchanging practices. Yet, like many other locations around the city, its future is uncertain due to the pressure of gentrification and the capitalist logic of use-value and appropriation.

The very relationship between artistic communities and gentrification is rather complex: on the one hand we can observe the disappearance of art spaces from certain areas like Kreuzberg.³¹ On the other hand, it is the artists' moving-in that is often identified as one of the primary gentrifying forces. The disappearance of public space and affordable work spaces along with housing insecurity seems to be one of the biggest challenges ahead for the city of Berlin, which in the last years became home to the *DW Enteignern* initiative aiming to expropriate the major property-owning companies in order to secure more rent-control and social housing. The results of the referendum held in 2021 showed that the majority of voters want the city rulers to go ahead with the expropriation. Following the political representatives' rather blatant ignorance of the referendum results, *DW Enteignern's*

³⁰ In my head I am listening now to Bill Withers: www.youtube.be/qkaexjc-1os

³¹ One sad example is the recent eviction of Labor Gras, founded in 1994 by Renate Graziadei und Arthur Stäldi, from their headquarters on Paul-Lincke-Ufer.

ongoing fight led to the recent ruling of the expert commission which gave a green light to the property socialisation process. The free dance scene has played its own small (but not minor) part in the long-term campaign with Argentinian choreographer Mateo Argerich choreographing, writing and performing with colleagues a sort of an anthem for the movement.³²

Not only the debate about affordable housing, but also the very right to vote in the referendum brought many of Berlin's troubles to light. A large portion of the local community, and one which is most vulnerable to speculation on the housing market, could not vote due to lack of official citizenship. In Berlin, regardless of the rhetoric of no borders and limits, feeling at home and having a voice in public debate is largely limited to those white and German. Much remains to be done regarding social justice and community empowerment in the city. The new ruling coalition does not inspire more hope with their claims of bringing *safety and cleanness* to Berlin, while divesting the social services in order to fund the police more generously – without addressing racialized police violence or proposing safer drug policies and public support centres for addicts. It seems (sadly so) that the poignant social diagnosis and political populism remain weapons in the hands of the growing far right and do not necessarily serve the empowerment of the historically leftist and *people-sensitive* parties such as the Greens or SPD. In the face of the ongoing war in Ukraine and the never-ending human catastrophe at sea, with hundreds of people drowning while trying to reach the shores of the EU, Germany proved to be very much entangled in supporting political and military violence abroad while securing the interests of its businesses and elites. All of us, paying taxes here or benefitting from public assistance, are somehow part of the machine that produces beautiful things at the most horrific costs. This leads me to questions that trouble me and many of my friends and colleagues in Berlin: Are we citizens? How do we claim the right to the city and influence on its future? What can we do as dancers?

The free dance scene seems to be a shimmering drop, a microcosmos within a vast mesh of planetary life. It reflects the mechanisms and challenges that grip our society and it resonates with political, economic and cultural changes, yet it also holds a place for resistance and alternative ways of doing and relating which should be nurtured rather than eradicated. The work that has been done in building the scene in the past decades should be seen as a great opportunity for all of us with access to its resources to continue our work and bring in more people from the margins of the scene to visibility. It must be noted, however, that the majority of work models, the pressure to produce, and the projective temporalities are in themselves mechanisms of gatekeeping and segregation, and they stand in conflict with the declarations of more accessibility, equality and de-accelerating. We need more social sensitivity not only on the side of the artistic communities, and not only towards an abstract global community, but also when considering our closest work environments and their foundations and limitations. What we also need is a more united front to oppose the continuous creation of short-term solutions and the growing precarisation of dance workers.

32 You can watch the video clip here: www.youtube.com/watch?v=Bzm0aGP2teM

To make the structures of social reproduction visible means to not only politicise our struggles for the sake of more recognition from the political class, but also to transform the way we work and the role our work plays in our social environment. The persistence, immense creativity as well as adaptability were proven by the entire field accommodating the demands of capitalist work and life regimes, now the task is to repurpose our tools and strategies in order to bring about something new, something that we do not yet have. Efforts towards artists' unionising, de-growth within the arts industry, and insisting on recycling, restaging and resting, constitute in my view some basic principles for the future of the scene while also calling into question deeply rooted beliefs about artistic genius, exceptionality and the romanticised poverty and busyness of the creative worker. However trapped we might feel in the current structures, ultimately the decision is ours – where and how are we going to invest our energies and attention, how are we going to be part of our artistic communities and civil society at large, and what impact on reality we will have through our work in the arts.

I tell my students, 'When you get these jobs that you have been so brilliantly trained for, just remember that your real job is that if you are free, you need to free somebody else. If you have some power, then your job is to empower somebody else. This is not just a grab-bag candy game.'³³