

Pina Bausch and the Dancing Body: Social Constructionism and Identity in *Nelken*, *The Rite of Spring* and *Kontakthof*

Olga Celda Real

Research Associate
King's College London
University of London
olga.e.celda_real@kcl.ac.uk

Recibido: 29/05/2022/**Aceptado:** 14/06/2022

Abstract. This article aims to consider the social construct of the dancing body and its role in the building of identity focusing primarily on the female dancing body as exercised in the seminal works of *Nelken*, *The Rite of Spring* and *Kontakthof* by the German expressionist choreographer Pina Bausch. The phenomenological discourse in these works 'embody the social and cultural dynamics in which they are generated'¹, making of them unique performative experiences. In these pieces of *tanztheater*, the characters embodied in the dancing bodies on stage are both, universal and anonymous, and the stories they tell are about human connexions and their consequences in a defined sphere. In these fundamental choreographies by Pina Bausch our perception of dance art leads to a response that goes beyond aesthetic dispositions and forces the spectator into an explorative interdisciplinary journey of self-discovery. As Pina Bausch herself said, 'it is not about how people moves, but what moves them' (Pina Bausch in Bringshaw, 2009).

Keywords. Pina Bausch, *Nelken*, *The Rite of Spring*, *Kontakthof*, female dancing body, male dancing body, interdisciplinarity, Tanztheater Wuppertal, social body, performativity, identity, *tanztheater*, social constructionism, musical landscape, gender, dancing bodies.

Pina Bausch y el cuerpo danzante: construccionismo social e identidad en *Nelken*, *La consagración de la primavera* y *Kontakthof*

Resumen. Este artículo tiene como objetivo el considerar los elementos de la construcción social del 'dancing body' y su papel en la construcción de identidad centrándose en el 'dancing female body' tal y como se ejerce en las obras seminales de *Nelken*, *The Rite of Spring* y *Kontakthof* de la coreógrafa expresionista alemana Pina Bausch. El discurso fenomenológico de estas obras 'encarna la dinámica social y cultural en la que se generan' (Shevtsova: 2002), convirtiéndolas en experiencias performativas únicas. En estas piezas de

¹ Maria Shevtsova, *Performance, Embodiment, Voice* (London: Goldsmiths, University of London, 2002), 2.

tanztheater, los personajes encarnados en los cuerpos que danzan en el escenario son universales y anónimos, y las historias que cuentan son acerca de conexiones humanas y de sus consecuencias en una esfera definida. En estas coreografías fundamentales de Pina Bausch, nuestra percepción del ‘art dance’ conduce a una respuesta que va más allá de disposiciones estéticas y obliga al espectador a un viaje exploratorio interdisciplinario de autodescubrimiento. Como dijo la propia Pina Bausch, ‘no se trata de cómo se mueve la gente, sino de qué la mueve’ (Pina Bausch en Bringshaw, 2009).

Palabras clave. Pina Bausch, *Nelken*, *The Rite of the Spring*, *Kontakthof*, dancing female body, dancing male body, interdisciplinarietà, Tanztheater Wuppertal, cuerpo social, performatividad, identidad, *tanztheater*, construcción social, paisaje musical, género, dancing bodies.

When analysing the performance of artistic works, especially dance, in which the perception of the body is central to our understanding, we are aware that their functioning as social construct products are embedded in their potential discourse and in our own notion of gendered identity. In these works, social constructionism and symbolic interaction happening on stage encapsulate the fundamental need for human bodies to express, to make, to be part of social groups and groupings, and their actions are intimately related to the musical landscape in which they materialize. In this line of thought, from the audience’s side, we can argue our visual perception of any artistic product is based in our capacity to recognize it as such and to identify tropes which acknowledge the social contribution of said product to the cultural sphere. In *Nelken*, *The Rite of Spring* and *Kontakthof* the explorative process performed by the dancing bodies on stage happens because they provide a corporeal and conceptual space in which gender difference generates discourse. This experience also exists in classical dance, in which the codified and rigorous steps and positions of ballet constructs an image of the ‘classical body’. Yet, as Mary Russo argues, this happens because our idea of the ‘classical body’ is ‘monumental, static and closed’². Conversely, in the modern Expressionistic dance proposed by Pina Bausch, there is a flexibility that often plays with binary differences and moves away from the standardization of gender roles. Her social construct of gender is a phenomenon that derives from the proposed social context of each piece of *tanztheater*. In Pina Bausch’s works, part of this social context is her unnervingly capacity to place the spectator close to acts of almost maddening love, or close to acts of raw violence, sometimes overtly evident, others in subdued but nevertheless still in menacing form, as the threatening scope of the latter’s damaging force upon self-identity and body presence in any manifestation is affected. This last point chimes and resonates with the specifics of *Nelken* (1985) in particular, in which men dressed in women’s silky frocks hop like happy bunnies amid the carnations of the title until a dystopian wave of

² Ann Cooper Albright, *Choreographing Difference: The Body and Identity in Contemporary Dance* (Hanover NH: Wesleyan University Press, 1997), 63.

security guards and four Alsatians dogs round them up. Or when a set of virtuosi executed *bourrées* steps by a male dancer wearing a woman's dress with a whirling skirt is abruptly stopped, as he angrily confronts the audience telling the spectators that if we want any more, we can do it ourselves. Here also a female dancer makes performance of potato peeling, her actions incongruously matched to her flirtatious body language and her evening frock. In this same piece of *tanztheater*, the mesmerising sing-language solo by Lutz Förster of the evocative song *The Man I Love* by George Gershwin breaks the social construct of a mesomorphic body by transferring onto it attributes expected from the female dancing bodies on stage. At this point in the production the spectator is astounded because what Pina Bausch is telling now is that *Nelken* is above all about love, about our need for love, about our need to love. The proposal is both, subversive and eerily fragile.

Devised only four years before the fall of the Berlin Wall, there is an ominous sense of the past permeating this piece of *tanztheater*, of that Germany then still split in half. This infiltrating feeling is incorporated into the dancing bodies' acts of deviance, as behaviour breaks up ordinary social rules: the rough bullying during passport inspections, acts of humiliation exercised upon the dancers, the force-feeding of a woman, men face-diving into chopped onions, men and women dressed in silk dresses in pastel colours interacting in polarised roles, the jarring shouting, the women sitting in collapsed chairs..., here, as Camille Paglia stated, 'emotion is chaos'³. In *Nelken*, the public and private parts of life are entwined and shared, creating an explicit and reflexive discourse decentred from a prescriptive set of meanings. The surreal realism of Pina Bausch is present in her unnerving facility to invalidate the roles of signifier and signified, in deconstructing our expectations. It is a trait that brings to the audience a disconcerting energy, nakedly placing it on a stunning space covered in carnations, a mesmeric space designed by Peter Pabst. By the end of the production, these pinkish flowers have been trampled on, leaving the spectators with the question of what the meaning behind this act of destruction was, as theatre space is intrinsic to its conception and perception, yet the former vision of beauty is now a soiled space. *Nelken* dissects the idea of what power means, of what individuality means, of the ephemerality of it, of the yearning for happiness and of the unavoidable fragility of it all. In this piece of *tanztheater*, musical landscape plays a central role to the absorbing choreography of the 'Nelken Line', in which a walking line of smiling dancers tells us, by means of repeated movements-sentences, the changing of the Seasons, as the bewitching musical piece of *West End blues* by Louis Armstrong & His Hot Five flows across the auditorium. In this precise and compelling series of repeated dance movements, the precise gestures are breath-taking. The movements are simply and yet almost hypnotic in their harmonic sequencing: Movement 1 is 'Spring' (Spring, Grass, Small), Movement 2 is 'Summer' (Summer, High Grass, Sun.), Movement 3 is 'Autumn' (Autumn, The Leaves Fall) and Movement 4 is 'Winter'

³ Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae: Art and Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickson*, (London: Penguin Books, 1992), 26.

(the arms are bent in front of the body with the hands stretched and ‘cold’ feeling is enacted). Initiated by a topless female accordion player roaming across the carnations, Delsarte’s principle of tension and relaxation is harmonically evident in the fluidity of their corporeality. Delsarte advocated that human gesture has emotional meaning, and here the actions connect music and bodies, transmitting to the audience an almost exhilarating feeling of shared happiness: it encodes minimal, shared and lyrical sociocultural semiotic activity. By the end of this luminous dance, we know that what counts in *Nelken* is the dancing bodies ‘and the stories they tell’⁴, as their immense potential and scope to create meaning depend upon their assertion in interaction. There is also a disquieting peeling of social layers, of apprehension regarding how far the social construct of the gendered dancing body is shaped by a panoptic setting. In the resulting cultural product, there is a display of almost cathartic reactions performed by dancers, which are then transferred on to a stunned spectator, crystallizing in images of visual *dys*-civilization of social bodies, as ‘society exists as both objective and subjective reality’⁵.



Anne Martin in *Nelken*

Photo: Ulli Weiss@ Pina Bausch Foundation

Source: Pina Bausch Foundation

Social construct of the gendered body happens amid the formation of social groups and groupings, and derives from the shaping force of *habitus*, a term Bourdieu argues as an array of several embodied dispositions which can, theoretically, reproduce society ad libitum. Dance’s contribution to this cycle - as an art form-, occurs because it can express, on the performative dancing

⁴ Cooper Albright, *Choreographing*, 119.

⁵ Peter Bergen and Thomas Luckman, *The Social Construct of Reality. A Treatise in the Sociology of Knowledge* (London: Penguin Books, 1996), 149.

bodies' corporeal space, changes happening in a particular historical era, choosing to either reproducing or interpreting them in precise chronotope. In this context, the final product is the embodiment of cultural values 'resonating through the bodies that constitute them'⁶. According to Bourdieu and his theory of taste, we can argue that the *illusio* beholding this dance art would, at different points in time, legitimate it artistically. This legitimation is dependent on the idea that the body is an expressive anthropomorphic presence, it is a social entity possessor of qualities capable of defining organic responses and discerning taste. Therefore, this awareness tolerates our artistic perception to evaluate and recognize dance art on a cognitive level. To Bourdieu, the body itself becomes the showcase wherein the social world is reproduced. As Chris Shilling argues, Bourdieu's theory of social reproduction is at the core of 'the body seen as the bearer of symbolic value'⁷. Shilling argues this position further avowing that for Bourdieu 'the body itself enters into the production of the *habitus*', therefore 'shaping and being shaped by the structure of social fields'⁸. To Bourdieu, the *habitus* depicts the social characteristics engraved in the body of a biological individual. This view is defended by Foucault, who argued that there are not 'essences' in people's bodies, but 'inscriptions' of identity⁹. There is a cognitive understanding permeating this belief: that the body moves beyond the boundaries of being a living entity and becomes part of a contextualized process of identification and recognition. It becomes a social constructed body happening in precise time and space. As Joanna Parviainen argues, embodiment is also historical, as body image and its perception changes as the evolution process develops and cultural shifts occur. In the context of Pina Bausch's artistic trajectory, the outcome happens because 'cultural transition concerning embodiment demanded a new dance form'¹⁰, ushering a new way to understand the world around us. In an ever-metamorphosing globalized world, social constructionism shapes our perception of an objective art such as classical dance because it tends to reinforce our disposition to recognized canons. As such, gender binary in performance art often enacts rituals that instil archetypal peripheral visions of womanhood and manhood. But now, the introduction of modern dance and its bearing on feminist discourse changed it all. Indeed, the contribution of female dance artists – from Duncan or St. Denis to Graham and Bausch -, challenged the formalist look of dance, transforming it into a more organic proposal of the dancing bodies on stage, as these choreographers queried what Norbert Elis called 'the lengthy process of education before [a human individual] is accepted fully into society'¹¹. The shaping of new spatial dynamics developed parallel to a paradigm shift challenging set practices because of the wish to explore movement and the seemingly never-ending scope

⁶ Cooper Albright, *Choreographing*, 97.

⁷ Chris Shilling, *The Body and Social Theory* (London: Sage Publications, 2006), 111.

⁸ Shilling, *The Body and Social Theory*, 130.

⁹ Shilling, *The Body and Social Theory*, 203.

¹⁰ Joanna Parviainen, *Bodies Moving and Moved: A Phenomenological Analysis of the Dancing Subject and the Cognitive and Ethical Values of Dance Art* (Vammala: Tampere University Press, 1998), 82.

¹¹ Shilling, *The Body and Social Theory*, 131.

of corporeality. At different points in time, the ensuing ‘critical enquiry and cultural critique’¹² happened because body movement and its semiotic activity has the capacity to engender -as Edna Okno argues- ‘revolutionary implications’¹³. In Pina Bausch’s works, the body moves away from being just biological phenomena and moves into the sphere of sociocultural semiotics. As part of this process, the dancing body on stage becomes a rationale of embodiment, as its corporeality inhabits all motions and all emotions. On this basis, the development of a whole new idiom in contemporary dance began to develop at the Tanztheater Wuppertal by the hand of Pina Bausch.

Bausch’s approach to dance is embedded in critical enquiry, not just of what we do, but also of what we are. In *Nelken*, *The Rite of Spring* and *Kontakthof*, the role of the spectator is not a passive entity, but it is instead that of a ‘fellow traveller’, the *mitreisende*, as the spectator in the audience experiences the traversing of a unique and certainly intimate journey happening analogously to the dancing bodies on stage. Influenced by her own life experiences, Pina Bausch’s body of work for Tanztheater Wuppertal proposes a rotund interdisciplinary corpus in which postmodernist critical theory and performativity bypasses fractional perspectives of dance as an art form. Looking at the historical contextual background, Joanna Parviainen argues the new dance phenomena that began happening at the beginning of the twentieth century was related to ‘cultural embodiment, cultural communication and the whole shift in the Western world’¹⁴. Born in Solingen (Germany) in 1940, Pina Bausch’s artistic evolution was shaped by her tutoring by Kurt Joss at the Folkwang Hochschule and by her experience at the Juilliard School in New York, at which one her tutors were Antony Tudor. Her first connection with the Ballet der Wuppertal Buhnem was in 1971, when she was invited to devise an ensemble piece, progressing on to the position of director in 1973 after Kurt Joss retired. Since then, Bausch’s vision of *tanztheater* evolved relentlessly further as a symbiosing of the disciplines of dance and theatre, her style at first influenced by the heritage of the German Expressionism’s dance trends prevalent during the Weimar Republic. With Pina Bausch’s dancers at the Tanztheater Wuppertal it was a case of ‘body, mind and spirit are one’¹⁵.

¹² Mark Franko, *Dancing Modernism. Performing Politics* (Indiana: Indiana University Press. Bloomington and Indianapolis, 1995), 27.

¹³ Franko, *Dancing Modernism*, 27.

¹⁴ Parviainen, *Bodies Moving and Moved*, 82.

¹⁵ Shevtsova, *Performance, Embodiment, Voice*, 7.



Arnaldo Alvarez, Marlis Alt, Guy Detot and Jan Minajík in *The Rite of the Spring*
Photo: Rolf Borzik@Pina Bausch Foundation

The continuous process of evolution of the human body is tested in the expressive possibilities found in dance movements, energy and dancing bodies' interactions. This approach is evident in Pina Bausch's *The Rite of Spring* (1975), wherein ritualistic signs are encoded in signifier and signified acts of extraordinary violence. On a set designed by Rolf Borzik, the stage floor covered in brown topsoil, this seminal piece embodies an ebullient debate on sex and gender identity, delivered with an uttermost physical aggression that transcends the dancers' space and infiltrates the audience. The building of a threatening atmosphere is provocative and unsettling. In this work, what we see on stage is a (purposely made) means to an end: the fragility of one's sense of identity when engaging on shared rituals of rivalry and celebration, and more specifically on the position of female's identities asserting their human agency in a social world. It is an unsettling choreography that bitterly denounces the vulnerability of women in a male dominated setting. In *The Rite of Spring*, Pina Bausch's bodies dance in euphoric or dysphoric union, placing gender definition into binary opposites. The images and tropes emerging as the plot unfolds provide a hemispheric perspective as to the performative of gender division. The choreography is a stunning piece of *tanztheater*, the dancing bodies, at first uniform and harmless, by the end of this *sacre* piece, an unstoppable force of terrifying energy. It is a piece that angrily shakes the spectators with both hands, telling a story that push us beyond our comfort zone. It is also the least abstract of all her works, as the dancers on stage are recognizable gendered bodies. Pina Bausch's original *Das Frühlingsopfer* was first danced as a three-

parts piece in 1975, but now just the last section -*The Rite* itself- is being performed. With its waif-looking women wearing diaphanous frocks in a state of terror, with its half-naked men embodying omnipresent sexual force, their bodies smeared in soil and sweat, with its bellicose choreography and its terrifying conclusion, this artistic piece is a chief product in modern dance. The musical landscape created by the score is both, inexorable and intimately entwined into the dancers' movements. Stravinsky's extraordinary music exhaustingly conveys a sense of unsettling spatial imaginary, encapsulating the paroxysmal sacrifice of the Chosen One. Her red (menstrual) dress, a mishandled rag changing hands among the dancers, gives a premonitory clue as to the climax the audience should expect. The visceral conclusion of the ritualistic sacrifice of the maiden, her body thrust on the brown soil, face down, her last exhaling breath as Stravinsky's last chord breaks the air, engenders breath-taking visual images. The kinetics in this piece by Pina Bausch enact the performative of organic elements on stage. There is an organic realism in its semiotic meaning. In *The Rite of Spring*, the brown soil covering the stage reminds us of Earth. Mother Earth. The soil is a 'live' component in our semiotic spectrum and plays a distinctive role in our perception of the dance. It embodies the *sacre* elements of life and death. Pina Bausch's choice also hacks into our deepest religious learning: 'From dust thou were made, dust thou will return'. Much has been written about the impossibility to categorize in a methodical and detached way the meaning of Pina Bausch's choice for such a tactile set design for this production. Here, the organic landscape created by Rolf Borzik for *The Rite of Spring* is a testimony of Bausch's desire for exploring the expressive scope of dance and body on a particular biological realm. The brown soil on stage encodes metaphors of renewal and death, signalling the endless cycle of the seasons. The beautiful circles formed by the dancers with their bodies increasingly soiled, function as signifier in this artistic piece encapsulating Bausch's doxastic view of the power of Nature. In this stunning piece of *tanztheater*, the dancing bodies on stage are single entities functioning in isolation or in ensemble format, dancing either in a frantic and furious way or in perfect geometry.



Marlis Alt and Jan Minačík in *The Rite of the Spring*
Photo: Rolf Borzik@Pina Bausch Foundation

Repetition of movement is at the core of Pina Bausch's *tanztheater*. Repetition on stage encodes in the bodies minimal acts reproduced in daily life, engraved in our comprehension of social and cultural signs. The diachronic and synchronic movements of repetition educe exhausting discernment; like the one felt by the spectator as the embodied frenzy narrative, unfolding before our eyes, signals the Rapine's choosing of the victim. It is a brutal ritualistic approach to the relationship between human body and Nature, peremptory in their indissoluble connexion. Mary Douglas's anthropological view of the body seen as a 'natural symbol'¹⁶ derives from our cultural and social beliefs. The shamanistic value of the dancing body in *The Rite of Spring* is both, sacred and profane. It is a corporeality visually embodied. The visual metamorphosis from an almost nude, untainted dancing body into a mucky, palpitating entity, reinforces our doubts as to the ephemeral composition of the human body. The delineation of the 'margins of the body'¹⁷ are thus, boundaries between the natural world and the social world. In this work by Pina Bausch, the Foucauldian body, 'stops being a biological entity, metamorphosing into a

¹⁶ Alexandra Howson, *The Body in Society. An Introduction* (Cambridge: Blackwell, 2007), 76.

¹⁷ Howson, *The Body in Society. An Introduction*, 77.

highly malleable product'¹⁸. The performative dramaturgy imagined in Pina Bausch's *The Rite of Spring* is pregnant with symbolic violence; here, 'the social body constrains the way the physical body is perceived'¹⁹. Ritual is entrenched among volatile action and festers under the umbrella of a finite social world in which both, the female dancing body and the male dancing body, are part of a cruel and relentless process of recognition and identification. The shamanistic value of the female dancing body in this work is embodied in ritual practices, in recognizable signs rooted in our consciousness. As our visual perception is supported by kinetics elements and by the distinctive semiotic values attached to biological differences, the growing uneasiness of the story unfolding in front of our eyes raises the thorny issue of the vulnerability of the female dancing body, of the unstoppable sacrificial ritual of the Chosen One.



Josephine Ann Endicott and Jan Mink in *Kontakthof*
Photo: Rolf Borzik@Pina Bausch Foundation

During the opening of *Kontakthof* (1978) each dancer steps forward to stand and stare in an invisible mirror. Facing the audience, the dancers make the spectators accomplices of a small intimate act of self-identity, of a ritual usually performed in the private sphere. We, the spectators, look back at them, each one of them different, physically diverse and identifiable. In this piece of *tanztheater* the male dancers wear suits and ties, an unbroken uniform that reinforces the control they try to exercise over the women. The female dancers, in silky frocks in block colours, change outfits along the performance, the routine of dress-

¹⁸ Shilling, *The Body and Social Theory*, 65.

¹⁹ Howson, *The Body in Society. An Introduction*, 6.

changing echoing long-gone social rituals. Pina Bausch plays too with the spectators' sensitivity to different shades of colour, making our own reaction performative, as this trope fluctuates when some of the female dancing bodies change into black dresses, predicting a turn of atmosphere. The title *Kontakthof* is a hybrid word translated as 'contact courtyard' but is also a slang term usually applied to brothels. Here, the 'contact' of the term conveys a discomforting energy, found in the repeated walks across the stage, in the violence of some of the movements' sentences, in the unexpected shouting, in the abruptness of the encounters between the dancing bodies. In one particularly unsettling scene, men surround a woman standing alone, almost in a trance-like, impassive in her predicament. The men prod her body, touch her, grab her hair, her body is mishandled, she is slapped. The men twitch her nose, rub her tummy, the invasive touching makes her fall on the floor, her body, still non-stop fondled, like a ragdoll in the hands of cruel children. In this scene, the female dancing body has migrated from her original position as object of male gaze -and its potential for adoration- to subject of abuse and violence. Here again, like in *The Rite of the Spring* and *Nelken*, we are witnessing a process of *dys*-civilization that, in *Kontakthof*, questions the misuse and abuse of female identity in a social world. At this moment in the production, the disturbing scene signifies the absence of 'refinement of customs' and queries a latent absence in these male entities of an 'exercise of restraint'²⁰, as their actions condense a dystopian vision of a fractured social world. Again, the dancing body in this piece of dance theatre by Pina Bausch is a highly complex creation functioning in precise time and space. The scene depicts a particular gendered group which has the attributes forming a 'social body' sharing a nexus of motivations, making the characters a defined social grouping exercising power over the weakest. At this point, the semiotic activity in the production conveys Bakhtin's belief that the individual exists (and survives) as part of a group. There is here denouncement whirling around this vision of womanhood we are presented with, as we see the female body – as Simone de Beauvoir argued- 'considered an object that is looked into and examined'²¹. In this context, the abuse of the female dancing body in *Kontankthof* brings up the question as to why this happens and what this female body needs to achieve before, as Norbert Elis argued, she can 'be accepted fully into society'²², to be recognized beyond the categorization gender places upon her identity. But this reckoning also unveils the fears facing the individual, being either forced on by people from dominant forces or self-imposed, to fit into a particular social construct to be admitted, as the danger rests on what Shilling warns is the 'social control'²³ of social groups abusing power and their influence in the categorization of identities. In *Kontakthof* the discursively constituted body moves away from naturalistic settings and moves into the spheres of social constructionism and symbolic interactionism. This approach questions and highlights the social importance of the human body for

²⁰ Shilling, *The Body and Social Theory*, 151.

²¹ Howson, *The Body in Society. An Introduction*, 56.

²² Shilling, *The Body and Social Theory*, 131.

²³ Shilling, *The Body and Social Theory*, 132.

‘making and remarking social life’²⁴. As with *Nelken*, structure is non-linear, but a set of interludes interlocked by movement’s sentences, often repeated, forming vignettes that mirror the recurrence of social acts and actions present in daily life interaction.

In *Kontakthof*, the ever-presence of repeated movements, or action like the crossing of the stage in diagonal or in round formations, are all routine actions echoing and associated with familiar activities present on the space the dancing bodies inhabit, as the quotidian is an important element in Pina Bausch’s works. In this piece of *tanztheater*, the dancing bodies interact synchronically on stage with their partners or alone. The dance becomes a metaphor for human relationships, more specifically, for broken relationships, for the need for interaction and human contact. With a set designed by Rolf Borzik, *Kontakthof* materializes on a bare and featureless sort of dance hall at which this group of people meet. Meet to dance, meet to form social encounters. But this formalist setting unfurls not as a place to conduct sedate affairs, but as a nightmarish version of a conventional space to initiate social encounters. With a set of twenty-two dancers, musical landscape plays a prominent and organic role in the choreography, and it is intrinsic to the movement and to the encounters we see on stage. *O Fräulein Grete* and *Du Bist nicht die Erste* by Juan Llossas are repetitively played during the performance, the catching and at time melancholic music creating a sensorial landscape in which rhythmized repetition is synchronized with the movements’ sentences. Part of this performative experience is the hilarious moment when a German black and white nature film appears in view, the soundtrack narrated by an expressionless male voiceover; an unexpected change that deconstructs the ongoing traditional musical landscape and provokes an unexpected sensory turn in the audience, prompting a burst of laughter. The puckish punch in this scene resting on the fact that the film concerns the mating habits of ducks populating the river Elbe.



Pina Bausch Portrait
Photo: Ulli Weiss@Pina Bausch Foundation

²⁴ Howson, *The Body in Society. An Introduction*, 7.

Pina Bausch shares Mary Douglas' proposal of the body perceived as a receptor of 'social meaning and a symbol of society'²⁵. In the arena in which the dancers move and interact, the influence of accumulated capital - corporeal, cultural and economic- is the force behind the breeding of social signs, and this collective of signifiers and signified elements craft a distinctive social body with a symbolic value in the fields. In this context, the validity of Bourdieu's *body hexus* theory and its intimate relationship with *habitus* is intertwined with the 'relative intractability of corporal habitus in a social realm'²⁶. In these work by Pina Bausch, there is a 'sophisticated vision of human affairs as a mosaic of warring impulses'²⁷, a lyricism spanning interdisciplinary visions of corporeal expressionism and hybridity. In *Kontakthof*, behind the initial conservative setting, gender is performative and movement breaks through the restrains of formalized motion, resulting in a seminal piece of *tanzertheater* that proposes a prescriptive set of meanings conveying discursive value. It creates and fosters empathy in the spectators through a process of recognition and rejection. Here, as Beckerman argues in *The Social Body and Social Theory*, this empathy reflects 'the shifts of tension either between the characters or between stage and audience'²⁸, delivering reverberating and evocative images of social groups and groupings in precise chronotope.

Pina Bausch anticipated radical socio-cultural changes in thought and representation, and her radical approach to dance delivered extraordinary pieces of dance theatre. Her works are representative of the consolidation of the female creative artist, free from the historical male dominance in the choreographical world, but her extraordinary vision had -still has- a lasting and deep impact not just in the sphere of dance, but also in the way social constructionism alters our vision of the gendered body. In these seminal works, the shared valency of the dancing bodies on stage underlines Durkheim's postulate that systems of belief and knowledge are socially constructed. In these three pieces of *tanzertheater*, identity and social constructionism are enmeshed in and inherent to the experience of the dancing body on stage. Subjective experience and practice refine the margins of the body found in classical dance, producing instead an expressive and revolutionary cultural product. *Tanztheater* and its bearing on the semiotic activity of the dancing body has the opportunity of building new corporeal vocabularies capable of articulating the changing social, cultural and political transformations occurring in a globalized world in time and space. This consequently postulates a new discursive approach to the semiotic activity of the dancing body and in its bearing on kinetics. Pina Bausch's *Nelken*, *The Rite of Spring* and *Kontakthof* are illuminating works of dance art that encapsulate magistral visions of the dancing body, gender, identity and sociocultural semiotics found in social groups and groupings. In the global sphere of performance, these pieces

²⁵ Shilling, *The Body and Social Theory*, 65.

²⁶ Shilling, *The Body and Social Theory*, 116.

²⁷ Ellen Hawkins, Programme for *Café Müller* and *The Rite of Spring*, Sadler's Wells, 2008.

²⁸ Shilling, *The Body and Social Theory*, 8.

‘provide a product possessing an eternal universal value’²⁹ and foster an uncompromised approach to the unending exploration of disciplines crystallising in electrifying works of *tanztheater*.

Further Reading

- Banes, Sally. *Dancing Women: Female Bodies on Stage*. London: Routledge, 1998.
- Lefebvre, Henri. *The Production of Space*. Translated by Donald Nicholson-Smith. Oxford: Blackwell, 2007.
- Lynne Hanna, Judith. *Dance, Sex and Gender: Signs of Identity, Dominance, Defiance and Desire*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1988.
- Parker, Andrew, and Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick, eds. *Performativity and Performance*. London: Routledge, 1995.
- Shepherd, Simon. *Theatre, Body and Pleasure*. New York: Routledge, 2006.

²⁹ Antonio Gramsci, *Selection of Cultural Writings*. Eds. David Forgacs, and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 1985), 55.