

A Contemporary Body Made History

Dance reconstruction as artistic research practice into the history of dance techniques and choreography

by Martin Nachbar

In 1999, I started to work with a dance cycle called *Affectos humanos* that was created in 1962 by German choreographer Dore Hoyer. Trained as a dancer in release techniques, contact improvisation and improvisation, my initial research question was: How does a body absorbed in contemporary embodied practices approach, practice and perform dances that are embedded in a seemingly very different regime of physical practices and resulting aesthetics? The main reference for this inquiry was a film of the cycle (Geitel & Küfner, 1968). The tool was reconstruction, going through a process of copying the movements as seen in the film and then practicing and rehearsing them to be performed in front of an audience. The latest state of this reconstruction is part of a solo performance entitled *Urheben Aufheben* (Nachbar, 2008).

During the preparatory theoretical research, I hardly found literature about Hoyer's work. Besides a few texts by herself (e.g. Hoyer, 1948), and two monographic books (Müller, Peter & Schuldt, 1992, and Peters, 1964) the only available literature dealt with Ausdruckstanz in general or with other artists from this era. Only in 2002, Betsy Fisher published a text about her reconstruction of the *Affectos humanos* as part of her PhD dissertation at the university of Helsinki. One year later Frank-Manuel Peter submitted a dissertation at the Freie Universität Berlin about Hoyer's contribution to the development of modern dance in the 1930's. Of these texts, only Fisher's dissertation spoke about Hoyer's dances from a practitioner's point of view and experience. It seemed important to contribute to this sparse research situation and to do so from the point of view of a practitioner. Only an experiential approach would be able to:

1. Revive an interest in Hoyer's work by making her actual work visible rather than only writing about it.
2. Help understand Hoyer's approach to dance as language (Geitel & Küfner, 1968) that interweaves seamlessly with written language used to express philosophical thought, in particular Spinoza's philosophy of affects.

In this article I will try to outline the development of the reconstruction work from its beginnings, when Hoyer's dances seemed strange to my body, until its last public performance so far in 2010 in Heilbronn. As bodily knowledge tends to emerge over time (Deleuze, 1988), such a chronological approach seems to be the most appropriate way to make clear the relations and disruptions between historic and contemporary body usages and their resulting aesthetics in dance.

Dore Hoyer

Dore Hoyer (1911-1967) belonged to the second generation of Expressionist Dance, which did not go down in dance history as successfully as the first generation, as their careers were hardened by the Nazi regime, the war, and later on by a rigorous turn away from Modern Dance in post-war Germany. Hoyer was much formed by Expressionist Dance. But she searched for and walked down new paths. Her rigorously formal and abstract movement composition differed strongly from the rather empathetic and ecstatic works of her teachers though she still tried to communicate certain emotions or themes (Hardt, 2007). She created the *Affectos humanos* in this vein. It consists of five

dances, each of which deals with a human affect ¹. They are associative yet rigorous renderings of Hoyer's reading of Spinoza's *Ethics*, in which he describes 48 human affects as energies that affect the mind and the body by making them either grow or shrink in feeling (Bülow, 1976). Out of these 48, Hoyer chose: *Vanity, Desire, Hate, Fear, and Love*.

Symbolic gesture and release technique

In 1999, I started to reconstruct three dances of the cycle within the frame of the piece *affects/rework* (Chauchat et al., 2000). Together with Hoyer's friend Waltraud Luley, a now retired dance pedagogue and guardian of the dances, I worked on *Desire, Hate* and *Fear*. As I had been trained in postmodern dance styles that avoid high muscle tension but also gestural symbolization or emphatic expression of any emotion, it was difficult for me to understand how Hoyer's dances produced their intensities. At the time I tried to achieve this by doing the opposite from what I knew: I worked with high muscular tension, assuming that my habitual released use of the muscles necessarily went with an impossibility to express or signify emotion. This resulted in a restriction of my movement range and forced me to achieve impulse and rhythm through an emphasis on my breathing. However, sources clearly reveal that Hoyer never worked with high muscular tension or heavy breathing. She rather worked with a strong center of her body from which she could extend and retract her spine and limbs (Hardt, 2007). She placed intensity on the lines of this extension and retraction and produced movement that could linger between symbols arrested in gestures, and a continuous flow of movement. Despite the symbolic gesturality this was not so different from the release techniques I had studied. But it was exactly the symbolic layer that misled me to working with high tension and heavy breathing.

Tai Chi and theatre

It was only in 2007, when I started to work on the two remaining dances *Vanity* and *Love*, that I could solve this problem. I had started to study Tai Chi, a martial art and movement form that pays attention to relaxing the arms and hands in order to use the power of the body's center. This is nourished by the legs and feet, which allow the energy of the body's weight to flow into the ground. The resulting thrust travels up to the center and through the spine, shoulders and arms all the way into the hands. Although relaxing, the hands thus gain power. Pushing an opponent over then boils down to the ability to coordinate forces (Cheng, 1981). If one grafts this idea onto the symbolizing mechanisms in theatre through bodily gesture, we understand how Hoyer might have produced meaning not so much by making symbols through tensing her arms and hands into gestures. Instead, she might have exactly relaxed her arms and hands and let the symbolic gestures pass through her upper limbs extending from and retracting towards the body's center. Gestures would then rather emerge through a release of the upper limbs than be made through high muscular tension.

¹ Each of the five dances is three to five minutes long and is accompanied live by Dimitri Wiatowitsch, playing his original scores on piano and percussion.



Figure 1: *Urheben Aufheben* (2008)

Affect and gesture

With the last performance of *Urheben Aufheben* so far, in May 2010 in Heilbronn, I discovered the symbolic powers of this released yet gesturing body. I had found the necessity to relate hand gestures to the movements of the spine, the legs and the feet. This coordination was connected to the frequent relaxing of the arms and hands (as I had studied it in Tai Chi). This was close to the release techniques I had studied. After all Hoyer's techniques were not so different from the ones I knew. But they looked differently. Once this different look was looked through, gestures and their related imaginaries could unfold, expand and retract along the movements of my body and take on meaning by itself: History made contemporary through a contemporary body made history.

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This article is based on:

Urheben Aufheben (2008), including the reconstructed dances of Dore Hoyer's *Affectos humanos* and findings of *choreographic things, dancing*, thesis based on the research undertaken during studies at AMCh.