

**Burt, Ramsay. *Ungoverning Dance: Contemporary European Theatre Dance and the Commons*. Oxford Studies in Dance Theory. New York: Oxford University Press, 2016. 270 pp. (Hardcover ISBN: 9780199321926; Paperback ISBN: 9780199321933)**

In *Ungoverning Dance* (2016), Ramsay Burt dives into the potential of contemporary European choreography to resist the present predominance of neoliberal politics and post-Fordist economy, which inevitably affect also the field of dance. His ethico-aesthetic approach contributes to ongoing discussions amongst dance and performance scholars on the alternatives that performative practices and specific choreographic strategies might offer by critiquing and undoing the predicaments of artistic working conditions (see, e.g., Husemann; Cvejic; Pewny; Kunst; Lepecki). As Burt seeks to uncover the “political dimensions” of dance, which he emphatically understands as “subject to relations of power rather than party politics” (9), he is invested in demonstrating the manifold “correspondences between the aesthetic sensibilities” of particular dance pieces vis-à-vis “current social, political, or ethical concerns about inclusiveness and relationality” (11). Identifying a varied range of resistant strategies in the field of dance, Burt provides his readers with extensive analyses of works by artists such as Xavier Le Roy, Jérôme Bel, Jonathan Burrows, La Ribot, Fabián Barba, Faustin Linyekula, and Ivana Müller. These case studies are theoretically backboneed by three major philosophical strands of thinking, including the Italian operaist movement,<sup>1</sup> the ethics of Emmanuel Levinas and Maurice Blanchot, as well as Erin Manning and Brian Massumi’s process philosophy.

The primary thesis advanced by Burt holds that the choreographic pieces he examines use “aesthetic deconstruction” (4) to reveal and undermine the normative conventions and largely covert “mechanisms that are produced and maintained by dance as an institution” (5). His book aims to uncover the efforts to reassign “a degree of autonomy” to dance, a dynamics Burt calls the “ungoverning” of dance and which he defines as “giving it independence from its institutional constraints” (4). Instead of following the logic of neoliberal capitalism that tends to privatize artistic practices for profit, the works Burt is interested in guide the attention of the spectator to the governing conditions of the dance market and offer the possibility “to imagine [...] new ways of thinking and living” (8). They “ungovern dance” by exploring an emancipatory potential for the dancers as well as different relations of responsibility toward each other

and the spectators. Considering these resistant choreographic ways of working as “a commons,” or as “a resource shared by a group of people” (5), Burt argues that they “constitute a field of knowledge that is a common-pool resource” (19). His understanding of the commons is informed by the work of political scientists Charlotte Hess and Elinor Ostrom who point out that, ever since the dawn of the Internet era in the mid-1990s, commons no longer only refer to physical resources, such as land or water resources, but also include the sharing of knowledge and information for non-profit. With the rise of principles as open access to information or open source computer software, the commons introduce a dynamic of egalitarianism that challenges the dominant tendencies of privatization and neoliberal government intervention. Nonetheless, in the context of a “rapidly shifting” dance market (17) which tends to usurp and therefore to neutralize critical stances, these resistant choreographic practices are always in need of a kind of self-defense, which Burt sets out to unravel carefully.

While not reflected in the Table of Contents but explained by Burt in the Introduction, the book is divided into “three thematic sections” (27), which each is based on one of the three philosophical strands of thinking mentioned earlier. Thus, in the book’s first part (chapter 2-4), Burt zooms in further on the position of dance in the social and political context of neoliberalism and post-Fordism against the backdrop of writings by Paolo Virno, Franco Berardi, Toni Negri, Judith Revell, and others. He first measures the impact of this broader context by taking his cue from André Lepecki and Susan Foster, who each have argued that the different systems of art funding and sponsorship in Continental Europe and the United States have led to substantially divergent approaches to dance’s critical potential on each side of the Atlantic. While the American market-driven model, which was implemented in dance from the 1970s onwards, did allow for the development of innovative approaches to dance techniques and bodily awareness, it ferociously impeded the sense for experiment and critique of the dance works shown on stage. In contrast, Europe’s tradition of governmental subsidies seemed to foster the creation of choreographic work that not only challenged the conditions of the neoliberal era, but also radically deconstructed various choreographic and dancerly conventions. Through a comparative reading of a transatlantic set of four dance pieces,<sup>2</sup> Burt argues that American works, such as Trisha Brown and Simon Keenlyside’s *Winterreise* (2002), reinforced values such as creativity, individuality, and authenticity, which – even though they were embraced by the counterculture of the 1960s and 1970s – had already been incorporated by neoliberalism. Burt juxtaposes *Winterreise* with Xavier Le Roy’s choreographic adaptation of *Le Sacre du Printemps* (2007), in which Le Roy

reenacts the movements of a conductor directing Stravinsky's music score, after having taught himself these movements in only a couple of weeks. In this manner, Burt contends, Le Roy "deconstructs the idea of a performing artist as a provider of specialized services" (54) presenting dance as a kind of knowledge that is a part of the commons and potentially accessible to us all.

In "Rethinking Virtuosity" (Chapter 3), Burt explores how new democratic forms of virtuosity in dance might resist the post-Fordist appraisal of creativity and skillful excellence in economies that are largely driven by immaterial labor rather than by the circulation of material goods. Going beyond the common meaning of virtuosity as the demonstration of a particular skill, Burt draws on Hannah Arendt who redeemed the political dimensions of virtuosity by showing that, in the Greek *polis*, virtuosity is linked to one's active participation in the public sphere. This opens toward an understanding of virtuosity as not so much being a measure to assess the value of an end product, but rather as a phenomenon residing in the act of performing itself. In a densely construed argument, Burt then posits that virtuosity holds a promise of political emancipation. When virtuosity is understood as a performative intervention in the public domain, it bespeaks a degree of engagement that – instead of boasting a particular skill or talent – values life itself. From this perspective, virtuosity is less concerned with generating virtuously crafted products and rather becomes a political stance that can escape the product-driven dynamics of consumption and profit.

Those who are familiar with Ramsay Burt's scholarship know from his previous publications that he has an exceptional talent in concretizing theoretically complex reasonings by relating abstract concepts to actual choreographic practices. In the case of his discussion of virtuosity, he demonstrates the plausibility of his argument by applying it to William Forsythe's 1999 CD-ROM *Improvisation Technologies* and Steve Paxton's 2008 DVD *Material for the Spine*. Considering these two media formats as primary examples of disseminating choreographic knowledge amongst dance communities, Burt values the openness they afford in sharing expertise and the efforts in finding the right interactive formats to facilitate this exchange. Relying on Arendt, Burt maintains that "the virtuosity of both Forsythe and Paxton lies in the virtue and excellence they give to communities of dancers" (64). The CD-ROM and DVD function as active interventions in the public arena of contemporary dance, encouraging choreographers to familiarize themselves with the tools and movement principles of Forsythe and Paxton, while also allowing for creative appropriations of the material. Such initiatives resist the protectionist enclosure of the dance market

and turn it instead into a field of common resources to be shared amongst practitioners.

Despite his appreciation of “contemporary dance as a commons” (15), Burt does not advocate a naïve belief in its creative and emancipatory potential, since he also pays attention to the risks involved in the unbridled free use of choreographic material. In a detailed discussion of Beyoncé Knowles’ controversial video clip *Countdown* (2011), in which she bluntly copies the film version of Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker’s signature piece *Rosas Danst Rosas* (*Rosas Dances Rosas*, 1983), Burt is critical of how a mainstream popstar and her multinational record company Sony appropriate a Belgian choreographer’s movement style and vocabulary for commercial purposes. Yet he is appreciative of De Keersmaeker’s response to Beyoncé’s plagiarism through a project called *Re:Rosas!*, in which the choreographer provides audiences with online instructions on how to perform *Rosas Danst Rosas* and invites them to post their own version on YouTube. For Burt, *Re:Rosas!* confirms his main thesis, since it acts as “an acknowledgement that contemporary dance knowledge is a shared resource – a commons – rather than a commodity from which to generate financial profit” (71).

The second part of the book (Chapters 5-8) focuses on the question of ethical responsibility, which – according to Burt – is deeply intertwined with aesthetics. In “Laughter from the Surround” (Chapter 5), he more specifically argues that responsibility can be grounded in what literary scholar and film theorist Thomas Wall has termed “radical passivity” (103). The notion of radical passivity refers to a patient state of being that “has both political and aesthetic dimensions” (104), since it refuses to partake in the dominant moment of the present and, as such, it opens up “the potential within passivity to help imagine an alternative future” (105) – a space that also dance can establish. Following Wall, Burt draws on Blanchot’s philosophical reading of the phrase “I would prefer not to” as uttered by the character of Bartleby in Herman Melville’s 1853 short story, while he also ties in with Levinas’ view of responsibility as “restraining oneself from exploiting the other’s vulnerability” (101). These writings allow Burt to define passivity not as a stoic resignation from the world, but rather as a “principled strategy to avoid being interpellated into a supposedly normative identity” (108). Considering what form this strategic radical passivity might take in dance, Burt finds an exemplary instance in two performance pieces by Maria La Ribot in which the Spanish choreographer explores the physical and affective dimensions of laughter.<sup>3</sup> Burt buttresses his discussion of these works with anthropological

research that exposed how laughter can be regarded as a barometer to measure a society's degree of normative disciplinization and self-control by regulating the social behavior of laughing. As La Ribot's performers formally mimic the physical experience of laughter without cessation, they demonstrate a "passivity bereft of self" (114), which undermines any attempt at regulated self-control.

Burt continues his rethinking of responsibility in "Alone to the World" (Chapter 6) by zooming in on the format of the solo in dance. Engaging with the philosophical writings on solitude by Jean-Luc Nancy, Maurice Blanchot, Hannah Arendt, and Emmanuel Levinas, Burt argues that dance solos can evoke "different ways of moving out of solitude towards the world" (117). This kind of movement, however, does not deny the existential condition of being alone with oneself, nor does it immediately lead to a connection with the audience. Because the dance solos that interest Burt deviate from the traditional view that soloist works present a singular and allegedly authentic subjectivity, he demonstrates how the solo can enact a particular kind of "unworking" as "it keeps meanings open and indefinitely postpones completion" (122). This openness poses specific challenges to spectators who are refused the possibility of finding a coherent whole in the work, which ultimately inhibits the audience from imagining itself as an essentialized community. Following Nancy's standpoint that communities should be unworked in order to avoid protectionist, nationalist, or even fascist tendencies in society, Burt finds a salient political potential in solos that through their disruption of aesthetic coherence also undermine the audience's naturalized identification with a larger community.

The next two chapters each provide yet another angle on the issue of responsibility. In "Performing Friendship" (Chapter 7), Burt analyzes different examples of what he calls "duos," a term he introduces to differentiate choreographic collaborations between two performers of the same sex from the more romantic notion of duets that conventionally refers to male-female relationships. Placing these works against the background of philosophical and sociological critiques of the neoliberal valuation of "short-term, mutually beneficial connections" (143) as well as of the promotion of sameness through social media, Burt demonstrates how duos uses their same sex-construction as a ground to highlight the mutual differences between the two performers, thereby opening up a space for ethical responsibility based on the recognition of difference and otherness. The political ramifications of difference are further explored in "Dancing Relationality" (Chapter 8). Burt discusses Steve Paxton's canonical improvisational piece *Magnesium* (1972) alongside a blog posted by the

Egyptian choreographer Adham Hafez in which the latter reflects on his experience of taking part in the 2011 Arab Spring street demonstrations. While the juxtaposition of Paxton and Hafez might seem incongruous, it allows Burt to show how they are both “embracing the unknowable and not trying to make it conform to the known and the familiar” (167). Drawing on the writings of Emmanuel Levinas and Erin Manning, Burt continues to elucidate how, in both cases, the acknowledgement of the other’s difference fostered an attitude of ethical responsibility, insofar as recognizing the vulnerability of other people can lead to a relational stance of respect and care.

The third part of the book (Chapters 9 and 10) is theoretically informed by Brian Massumi and Erin Manning’s readings of Gilles Deleuze, Henry Bergson, and Susanne Langer. In “The Politics of History and Collective Memory in Contemporary Dance” (Chapter 9), Burt investigates reconstructions, or what he calls “re-works” (187), by Faustin Linyekula, Olga de Soto, Martin Nachbar, and Fabián Barba. He points out that various of these pieces “cite the oppressed past” (194) by restaging choreographies that are usually not present in the contemporary dance scene, such as the work of expressionist dancers Mary Wigman and Dore Hoyer that Barba and Nachbar have reenacted. Once again, Burt’s central notion of “dance as a commons” proves its analytical potential here, as it also provides an illuminating perspective on the much-discussed topic of reenactment that demonstrates how these “re-works” tap into the collective pool of past dance knowledge and ultimately lead to a resistant re-writing of history.

In “Virtual Dance and the Politics of Imagining” (Chapter 10), Burt follows Massumi in conceiving of the virtual as the constructive “potential to become something in the moment that is not yet but about to arrive” (211). Dance pieces by New Art Club and Ivana Müller are virtual because they narrate stories that are not presented as such on stage, but rather evoked through tableaux that are linked together into a narration by spectators using their imagination. Burt claims that these works produce a political and ethical virtuality as they strip the performers off any individuality, enabling them to provoke a truly inventive imagination through a spatio-temporal density. In conclusion, the book ends with a helpful section on various keywords (such as “life,” “the political,” “responsibility,” “the commons,” “ungoverning,” and “open”), which readers are invited to consult as they please. It enables one to get a clear understanding of the book’s key concepts before diving into the at times dense and challenging discussions of both theory and dance throughout the different chapters.

While Burt's readings of choreographic works are insightful, his assumption that experimental dance operates at the margins of the field does not take into account the fact that, in recent years, also this segment of the dance scene has become institutionalized. Burt maintains to focus in his book on work that is "produced by independent dance artists working outside the official dance world made up of institutionalized ballet and modern dance companies" (187). However, singling out the work of choreographers such as Xavier Le Roy and Márten Spångberg to make a claim for "valuing alternative kinds of dance knowledge" (62) as a specific mode of resistance against dominant market mechanisms raises certain questions considering the impact of their work. One could ask in how far these "alternative" or "singular" kinds of knowledge might already be marketed as a "niche" and institutionalized as a governing aesthetic pattern in itself? Such questions have been posed by a range of German dance scholars (see, e.g., Husemann; Foellmer; Hardt and Stern; Kleinschmidt). In this respect, Burt's understanding of institutionalization as "working outside the official dance world" might, despite his familiarity with the Continental European dance scene, stem from the difference with funding policies in the UK. At least in Germany, in contrast, the "free"-lancing scene has arguably become institutionalized through various festivals, choreographic centers, and dance education (see Hardt; Husemann; Matzke). Nevertheless, what mitigates these potential objections is that Burt does offer a concept of critical resistance as not only an exclusive position of a few but as inherent to the restructuring of the dance field as a site of commons. His illuminating perspective thus incites one to ponder how to take his ideas of emancipatory potential and relational resistance further under the ongoing pressure of the market. Above all, *Ungoverning Dance* is a well-written and inspiring book for readers looking for virtuoso analysis of dance works as well as for a thorough weaving together of multiple theoretical approaches to dance.

KATARINA KLEINSCHMIDT

## Works Cited

Cvejic, Bojana. "Xavier Le Roy's Research of Research. Two case-studies: *Self-Unfinished* and *Untitled*." *Cairon: Revista de estudios de danza* (Journal of Dance Studies). Theme issue *Practice and Research*. Eds. José Antonio Sánchez and Victoria Perez-Royo. 13 (2010): 253-264.

Hardt, Yvonne. "A Relational Perspective on Dance and Theory – Implications for the Teaching of Dance Studies." *Dance [and] Theory*. Eds. Gabriele Brandstetter and Gabriele Klein. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2012. 265-270.

Hardt, Yvonne, and Martin Stern, (eds.). *Choreographie und Institution. Zeitgenössischer Tanz zwischen Ästhetik, Produktion und Vermittlung*. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2011.

Husemann, Pirkko. *Choreographie als kritische Praxis: Arbeitsweisen bei Xavier Le Roy und Thomas Lehmen*. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2009.

Foellmer, Susanne. *Am Rand der Körper: Inventuren des Unabgeschlossenen im zeitgenössischen Tanz*. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2009.

Kleinschmidt, Katarina. *Artistic Research als Wissensgefüge. Eine Praxeologie der Probe im zeitgenössischen Tanz*. Munich: epodium Verlag, 2018.

Kunst, Bojana. *Artist at Work: Proximity of Art and Capitalism*. London: Zero Books, 2015.

Lepecki, André. *Singularities: Dance in the Age of Performance*. London and New York: Routledge, 2016.

Pewny, Katharina. *Das Drama des Prekären: Über die Wiederkehr der Ethik in Theater und Performance*. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2011.

Matzke, Annemarie. "Das 'freie Theater' gibt es nicht: Formen des Produzierens im gegenwärtigen Theater." *Theater entwickeln und planen: Kulturpolitische Konzeptionen zur Reform der Darstellenden Künste*. Ed. Wolfgang Schneider. Bielefeld: transcript Verlag, 2013. 259-272.

---

<sup>1</sup> As Burt explains, the so-called Italian operaist movement "is also known as the Autonomous Movement, in Italian *Autonomia Operaia*" (22n57). The Italian term "operaismo" would translate in English as "laborism" and indicates the concern of the movement with working conditions and the exploitation of laborers and employees. Philosophers associated with the movement include Franco Piperno, Toni Negri, and Franco Berardi.

<sup>2</sup> Next to Trisha Brown and Simon Keenlyside's *Winterreise* (2004) and Xavier Le Roy's *Le Sacre du Printemps* (2007), Burt discusses John Jaspersen's *Fort Blossom* (2000) and Jérôme Bel's *Jérôme Bel* (1995).

<sup>3</sup> The two pieces by Ribot singled out by Burt are *40 Espontáneos* (2004) and *Laughing Hole* (2006).