

From Contemporary Dance to Contemporaneous Dance

Choreographic Re-enactment and the Experience of Contemporaneity After (Post-)Modernity

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Passing by the Berlin Altes Museum in 2005, the attention of tourists must have been drawn not only to the building's monumental façade, but also to a range of capitalized neon letters that were flickering from behind the gallery of pillars that encloses the entrance. As the brightly red sentence was shouting, "ALL ART HAS BEEN CONTEMPORARY," bystanders could hardly but wonder if the renowned historical collection of ancient bronzes, Greek vases, Roman sculptures, or even the notoriously timeless beauty of Nefertiti's bust hidden behind the museum's walls could indeed be called "contemporary." The seemingly simple but ambiguous phrase was devised by the Italian artist Maurizio Nannucci, who first showed the light sculpture at a gallery in Berlin in 2004. After seeing the work there, the principal of the Egyptian Museum, Dietrich Wildung, invited Nannucci to transfer it to one of Berlin's most prestigious institutions devoted to ancient art.¹ This change of location obviously amplified the puzzling self-consciousness already present in the original statement: as a contemporary work of art, it claimed *contemporaneity* as a presumably universal condition for all works of art, including the historical artifacts belonging to times thought to be long bygone.

Even if Nannucci's phrase is appealing because of its apparent candor, the grammar of the sentence solicits further thought, as it allows for two apparently incommensurable readings. If the emphasis lies on the idea that "*all art* has been contemporary," the notion of "contemporary art" as a general label we commonly use for – roughly speaking – post-war, avant-garde artistic practices is revealed as an empty signifier. That is, if *all art* can be called "contemporary," the word loses its potential to distinguish between the different types or even historical stages that mark the development of art, thereby ruling out contemporaneity as a distinctive feature to structure art history. On the other hand, if one chooses to zoom in on the verbal tense in the sentence that "all art *has been* contemporary," one would discover a paradoxical temporality in Nannucci's statement. His choice for the present perfect of the verb "to be" suggests a duration that extends from the past until now. The expression "has been" thus indicates that contemporaneity might be thought of as a condition that belongs as much to the present as it does to the past. From the moment something is characterized as contemporary, it

already slips into the passing of time (it “was” called contemporary), yet this slipping away does not necessarily mean that it stops being contemporary, insofar as the present perfect tense implies that it continues to be so.

This double reading of Nannucci’s neon-lit sentence is echoed in art theorist Terry Smith’s reflections on the common understanding of so-called “contemporary art.” As Smith points out, “contemporary art” is, quite basically, used as a label for “most – why not all? – of the art that is being made now,” from which it follows that “it is simply, totally contemporaneous” (“Contemporary Art” 683). Yet Smith hastens to trouble this generalizing and all too easy attribution of the hallmark “contemporaneity,” together with its twin term “presentness,” to “contemporary art.” Bringing to mind the *Oxford English Dictionary* definitions of “contemporary,” Smith singles out the fourth lemma, in which the meaning of the word is – remarkably enough – equated with the “modern,” or even the “ultra-modern,” and further extended to “art of a markedly *avant-garde* quality.” This extension, the lemma suggests, stems from the idea that the contemporary-as-modern is not only “characteristic of the present period,” but also “especially up-to-date” (703; original italics). On a closer look, the *OED*’s fourth definition of “contemporary” seems to contain all the complexities that have arisen from the tension between lived time and standardized time, which was essentially an invention of nineteenth-century modernity. From the moment clocks started ticking, according to uniform measures artificially imposed by convention,² it became possible to be ahead of time, or in delay, whereas keeping “up-to-date” – both literally and proverbially – increasingly posed a challenge in world that started to develop at an ever-accelerating pace. According to Smith, however, there is a qualitative difference between the expeditious and largely anticipative time of modernity – which could still march under the banner of progress towards the future – and the temporality characteristic of our contemporary moment. What we have lost along the way, he explains, is the unifying hope in a time yet to come, which leads him to define contemporaneity as follows:

Contemporaneity consists precisely in the constant experience of radical disjunctures of perception, mismatching ways of seeing and valuing the same world, in the actual coincidence of asynchronous temporalities, in the jostling contingency of various cultural and social multiplicities, all thrown together in ways that highlight the fast-growing inequalities within and between them. (Smith, “Contemporary Art” 703)

Rather than a singular temporal dimension in which the “contemporary” equals the “now” or the “present,” contemporaneity marks an era that is out of synch not only with the past and the future, but also with itself. Continuous technological innovations, global migration, or the rise of religious fundamentalism are all phenomena that, for Smith, underlie a new cultural regime in which time and temporality are dazzling rather than directional. Moreover, while the discontinuous nature of contemporaneity exacerbates a societal and subjectively felt condition of estrangement that was already incipiently present in modernity, it also signals a move away from postmodernity, which for Smith was too exclusively a Western affair that has proven its incompetence in accounting for our present globalized culture.³

Even though Terry Smith’s view on contemporaneity is weakened by some serious flaws (to which I come back below), his relatively concise definition of contemporaneity has become a key reference point in art theory, where the underlying implications of the general denominator “contemporary art” have been a topic of recent and ongoing debates.⁴ In this respect, it is rather surprising that the spearheading work in this domain has hardly found entrance in dance and performance studies, even though related questions of time and temporality have been on top of the agenda here as well.⁵ Similarly, the equally tangled issue of how historians deal with the presumed distance between the past and the present has emerged as a central concern in theory of history, but neither in this case are there hardly, if any, cross-disciplinary connections that could contribute to the insights developed in each field.⁶

In this contribution, I can offer only a modest beginning of what might grow into a larger cross-disciplinary dialogue, one that would confront possible answers to the perhaps impossible question of what function time fulfills in art, performance, and history. Here, I will focus on how these three strands coincide in the practice of so-called “dance re-enactment,” as I want to take the tendency amongst contemporary choreographers to revisit dance works from the past as an impetus to reflect on what this retrospective interest might mean for the contemporaneity of dance. Choreographic re-enactment can be easily dismissed as an instance of what Elizabeth Outka has termed the “commodified authentic,” a category she introduces to point out how the current commercialization of cultural heritage tends to turn experience and nostalgia into commodifiable products. While some dance re-enactments can certainly be ranged under Outka’s “commodified authentic,” my starting point here is one specific strand of choreographic re-enactment that takes a different direction. What I want to

explore is the perhaps basic but remarkable fact that quite a few choreographers have been turning to re-enactment as a means to return to the tradition of modern dance and, by the same token, to the historical epoch we have come to call “modernity.” With regard to the complexities of time and contemporaneity, this attraction to modern dance and modernity is particularly meaningful, since it suggests how our “present” cultural condition is still in the process of dealing with the incisive developments that changed the course of Western societies from the nineteenth century onwards. Contemporaneity, as pursued and experienced in dance re-enactment, often sits squarely between modernity and postmodernity, generating an ambiguous temporality that can only be understood by looking *at* as well as *beyond* dance as such.

Modernity Revisited

Looking across the heterogeneous practice of dance re-enactment, one readily stumbles upon several examples that take their source material from the heydays of modern dance: *A Mary Wigman Dance Evening* by Fabián Barba (2008) presents the audience with a dance program as it would have been performed by the expressionist dancer Mary Wigman in the late 1930s; Raimund Hoghe returns to the modernization of classical ballet in pieces such as *Sacre – The Rite of Spring* (2004), or *L’Après-Midi* (2007); Faustin Linyekula’s *La Création du Monde, 1923-2012* (2012) reconstructs a notorious work that came to be known as the “first negro ballet,” created by choreographer Jean Börlin in collaboration with the avant-garde painter Fernand Léger; Olga de Soto’s *Débords* (2012) gives a documentary account of the memories Kurt Jooss’s anti-war ballet *The Green Table* (1934) had left in the people who either saw the piece or performed in it as a dancer; Trajal Harrell’s *Caen Amour* (2016) playfully evokes Loie Fuller’s innovative experiments with dance costumes and the ways in which the often exuberant dresses epitomized her quest for a renewed and allegedly unconstrained dancing style. Regardless of the ostentatious differences between each of these works in terms of aesthetics and approach, they all return to early twentieth century modern dance, a period that in dance history is generally bookmarked as a vivid rejuvenation of choreographic techniques, theatrical staging, and bodily expression.

Listed together, these re-enactments and the pieces on which they draw already indicate that “modern dance” – not unlike the label “contemporary art” – is anything but a homogeneous category and rather encompasses a diverse range of practices that have been emerging from the late 1800s onwards and whose only

common feature might be the continued effort to overthrow the predominance of choreographic classicism that has been shaping the art of dance ever since ballet became the standard form.⁷ Seeking to liberate the body from codified movement and foregrounding the often charismatic persona of the choreographer as dancer, modern dance pioneers – such as Loie Fuller (1862-1928), Isadora Duncan (1877-1927), or Martha Graham (1894-1991) – initiated a wave of artistic innovations that eventually would grow into “postmodern” and, one or two decennia later, into “contemporary dance.” At least, this is how the traditional narrative of dance history goes, which makes it appear as if the succession of different era also find its expression in consecutive choreographic genres, types of dance, or – more broadly – distinct movement paradigms. But this kind of periodization, as dance historian Alexandra Carter points out, rests upon “organizing principles [that] are not neutral,” since “they give rise to meaning as phenomena are interpreted within the critical frames of reference that belong to each period” (41). In the case of dance, this has led to a situation in which “the continuity of modernism is rarely addressed alongside the radical changes of postmodernism” (43). In other words, when it is the label that comes to define the dance, we are easily thrown back into a linear chronology that wipes out internal differences in favor of general categories. This is a story of diversification through unification, insofar as the diachronic picture does not seem to allow for the manner in which synchronic depth is, paradoxically, defined by asynchronous rhythms.

Choreographic re-enactment intends to defy the generic periodization of dance, most basically by attempting to unveil the persistence of the past in the present. It must be admitted, however, that even this intention easily slips into its reverse effect. As some scholars have already warned for re-enactment’s inherent risk to “collapse temporalities” (Agnew 309) or to “flatten certain temporal economies” (Elswit 12), we must be wary of the fact that re-enactment might mimic the effect it endeavors to undermine. This danger becomes all the more acute when re-enactment is characterized, reductively, as a mere contemporary phenomenon that covers up temporal differences rather than exploiting them. In this respect, Terry Smith’s definition of contemporaneity as “the actual coincidence of asynchronous temporalities” (“Contemporary Art” 703) opens up a potentially fruitful perspective to probe how choreographic re-enactment not only aims at a convergence of different times, but also explores their ineluctable divergence. That is, while dance re-enactment might seek to find out how the past continues to influence the field of dance as it stands now, the *representation* of historical works unavoidably marks a difference with times presumably gone by,

establishing an ambiguous, if not liminal, middle zone where the past and the present might meet, yet without losing their respective singularity.

It is precisely from this perspective that the apparent renewal of interest in modern dance amongst contemporary choreographers is not only a salient tendency, but also a theoretically interesting phenomenon. For if modernity is known for inaugurating a new relationship with time and history,⁸ the current return to the cultural and artistic expressions to which this era gave rise might be indicative of a broader change in our attitude towards the past, the present, and the future. As much is suggested by Terry Smith, who claims that contemporaneity retains from modernity the idea of a “pregnant present ... but without its subsequent contract with the future” (703). Innovations continue – technologically, scientifically, and artistically – but the utopian hope in a redeeming time yet to come is what we have lost along the way. The largely unacknowledged problem with Smith’s theorization of contemporaneity, however, is that, even though he asserts that “in contemporaneity, periodization is impossible” (ibid.),⁹ his own account of the most conspicuous features of our time seems to suffer precisely from the inclination to periodize. The paradox that undermines Smith’s position is, more precisely, his assumption that the impossibility to periodize constitutes the period of contemporaneity. In this respect, the overall framework he draws does suggest a linear succession from modernity to postmodernity to contemporaneity, each of which are only in a limited sense related to one another.¹⁰

What Smith seems to be putting aside is the by now famous claim of Jürgen Habermas that modernity is an “unfinished project,” or the later Jean-François Lyotard’s view that postmodernity ought to be understood as a “rewriting of modernity,” rather than as a new cultural paradigm in its own right. Smith’s reluctance to give modernity a more central place in his view on contemporaneity stems from his wariness that to overemphasize the impact of modernity is to relegate all present phenomena to “modernity’s waiting room,” with the result that “you will fall short of grasping the complexities of the present” (“Rethinking Modernism” 312).¹¹ While it is certainly true that drawing a straight line between modernity and contemporaneity can only lead to unwarranted forms of *Hineininterpretierung* that reduce the past to the present and vice versa, downplaying the incisive changes that modernity has primed in western societies would be equally unjustified. The arguably only way in which, according to Smith, modernity and artistic modernism persist in contemporaneity and contemporary art is in a tendency he dubs “remodernism,” which he defines as “the on-going (and market-dominating) recursive renovations of artistic media”

that were first inaugurated by the historical avant-garde and which continue to steer the art world up until today (“Defining Contemporaneity” 162).¹² Even though Smith is anything but depreciative of this so-called “remodernism,” it does seem to entail not much more than a continuous yet sheer recycling of avant-gardist art strategies, akin to Peter Bürger’s diagnosis that the neo-avant-garde can only imitate the once authentic revolutionary gesture of the historical avant-garde (1974). This, in turn, is closely related to Marshall Berman’s assumption, which he develops most fully in his often-cited book *All that is Solid Melts into Air* (1982), that postmodernity can “only re-enact, rather than overcome, modernism’s deepest troubles and impasses” (Berman qtd. in Osborne, *The Politics of Time* 4).

In order to avoid getting hopelessly entangled in the much-discussed distinction between modernity and postmodernity, I want to focus briefly on Berman’s probably inadvertent use of the term “re-enact,” which is at once significant and troubling. In the first place, Berman’s claim feeds into the common contention that the emergence of re-enactment is nothing else than just the latest addition to an already familiar list of typically postmodernist genres or practices, such as pastiche or recycle.¹³ Some dancers, although not many, do align their re-enactment work with postmodernism. Betsy Fisher, for example, writes that “reconstructing dances is intrinsically post-modern because one has to take the dance out of its frame, analyze it, and perform it in a completely different setting than it was originally conceived” (17). Whether these characteristics would count as postmodernist is doubtful, but the point is that equating re-enactment with postmodernism seems to deprive re-enactment from its ability to cause temporal friction, that is, from its potential critical sting that would make it go beyond superficial imitation (and, by the same gesture, beyond the idea that imitation is all there is left) and towards a deeper, perhaps uneasy, co-mingling of times. Even though this latter point is implicit in Berman’s view on the relationship between modernity and postmodernity opens up, he decides not to pursue it. Instead, it is Peter Osborne who in *The Politics of Time* (1995) picks up on Berman’s suggestion, arguing that “if current uses of ‘postmodern’ and its cognates paradoxically remain with the framework of ‘modernity’, they do more than just repeat its existing forms” (4). Denouncing the fact that “a reflexivity about the temporal structure of modernity ... has hitherto been lacking,” Osborne raises the tantalizing question as to “what form of temporality is at stake in the use of ‘modernity’ as a category of historical periodization such that the paradox of the postmodern could arise?” (5).

Many years have already passed since Osborne made these claims and while we might find ourselves beyond possibly worn-out debates on the differences between modernity and postmodernity, it can be argued that there are some unresolved issues we still carry with us, and which reverberate in current discussions on contemporaneity. Osborne's more recent work testifies to this and, as such, it provides a useful entrance to make the notion of contemporaneity more productive for gaining insight into both the stakes and possible impact of choreographic re-enactment.

The Era of Contemporaneity

In *Anywhere or Not at All* (2014), Peter Osborne avows that “the very idea of contemporaneity as a *condition* is new,” but he also alerts us that “the widespread diffusion of the term” and its general usage as “a simple label or periodizing category” ignores the “increasingly complex temporal-existential, social and political meanings” that accrue to the notion of contemporaneity (17). Whereas, for Osborne, contemporaneity does signal a new era, it is – paradoxically – only the specific and inextricable relationship with other times that can define this era as new. Focusing on the prefix “con-” in “con-temporaneity,” Osborne defines the term as “a coming together not simply ‘in’ time, but *of* times,” from which he derives an understanding of “the present” as “a coming together of *different but equally ‘present’* temporalities,” which ultimately leads to “a temporal unity in disjunction, or a *disjunctive unity of present times*” (ibid.). It is not difficult to see how Osborne's understanding of contemporaneity comes close to Terry Smith's definition cited above, as it is the principle of disjunction that brings both their accounts into unison. The main difference between their respective views, however, is that the asynchronic temporality that defines contemporaneity derives for Smith solely from our current globalized world, while for Osborne it is also the legacy of modernity – both as a historical period and a cultural concept that articulates a particular relationship with time – that continues to shape contemporaneity, even though this persistent influence undergoes profound changes in times of globalization. In this sense, Osborne conceptualizes contemporaneity as “the temporality of globalization” that, even if it can be regarded as a “new historical temporality,” importantly “*interacts* with the temporality of modernity – the differential temporality of the new – in fiendishly complicated ways” (“The Postconceptual Condition” 23; italics added).

Particularly useful for my purposes here is that Osborne applies his “historico-philosophical conception of contemporaneity” to art, by tracing how “the

intertwining of modernity and contemporaneity as temporal forms” results in the emergence of what he calls “postconceptual art” (25).¹⁴ Although the notion of “postconceptual art” is somewhat infelicitous due to the suggestion that it chronologically follows after (“post-”) 1960s conceptual art, Osborne emphatically clarifies that he is rather pointing at “an art premised [sic] on the complex historical experience of conceptual art, broadly construed in such a way as to register the fundamental mutation of the ontology of the artwork carried by that legacy” (ibid.). Of the six features that, according to Osborne, characterize this legacy, there is one that is of pertinent importance to the manner in which choreographic re-enactment can be considered a symptom of contemporaneity and which he describes as “the radically *distributive* – that is, irreducibly relational – unity of the individual artwork across the totality of its multiple material instantiations, at any particular time” (*Anywhere or Not at All* 48; italics added).

The seemingly contradictory notion of an artwork’s “distributive unity” reflects the disjunctive coming-together of times that Osborne deems characteristic of contemporaneity. It expresses how art finds its realization in a multitude of media and, consequently, how any artistic work transcends its anchorage in the sheer here-and-now of the present. As such, it comes close to the idea of “dispersion” that Foucault foregrounds in *The Archaeology of Knowledge* ([1969] 2002) and which he uses to undermine the striving towards “total description” in traditional historiography (11). Criticizing the unifying narratives construed by historians who work to streamline the capricious courses of past events by focusing on causal relationships, homogenizing analogies, and periodization, Foucault proposes to embrace the twin ideas of discontinuity and dispersion in order to magnify the archaeological undercurrent in historiography.

Combined with Foucault’s dispersive archaeology, Osborne’s view on the distributive nature of art in the disjunctive era of contemporaneity brings to light what is at stake in choreographic re-enactment. The deliberate intention to re-stage choreographies from the past shows, as also Osborne would contend, that “the” artwork cannot be reduced to a singular and supposedly original instantiation, but rather spreads out across various re-workings that might alter the source material but which nevertheless revive it.¹⁵ As a matter of fact, re-staging is only one part of this virtually incessant distribution, insofar as the practice of re-enactment clearly proves that videos, photographs, drawings, and other archival documents are all equally important for dance to live on. Not only do these media and relics provide choreographers with the necessary resources to

create their re-enactments, but they are also the means by which re-enactment creates, in turn, its own afterlife, which might even be further amplified by the manner in which the work – in the aftermath of its staging – continues to travel through digital recordings, social networks, or academic publications that all in some way touch upon the “original” event.

Admittedly, this is a fairly basic observation, but it does exemplify how the existence of the artwork is predicated on multiple mediations that each, in one way or another, contribute to its appearance and significance. Together with Foucault, then, we can begin to see how the constitutive dispersion of art should also spill over into the manner in which art is historicized. Rather than aiming for neat narratives in which periodization precedes the characterization of past events, the migratory dynamics of “the” artwork – which re-enactment only intensifies – should result in an archaeological historiography that acknowledges and incorporates the multiple sources that give existence to art.

Thus, in general terms, re-enactment can act as a driving force behind the wheel that spins the threads of dance history, weaving together an ever expanding network of events, residues, and remnants in which the past overlaps with the present. What remains to be accounted for, however, is the specific relationship with modernity that re-enactment allows to explore and which seems to exert a renewed appeal to contemporary choreographers. If, for Osborne, the distributed conditions of contemporary art reflect the current era of contemporaneity, it also marks the transition from nineteenth-century modernity to what he terms “global modernity,” which is the name Osborne attributes to the present-day world. This global modernity is, on the most concrete level, propelled by the accumulative expansion of capitalism across the world, which simultaneously connects and divides different populations who all expect, hope, or are required to jump on the same train towards the promised land of prosperity. While this common direction projects a fictional *unity* on the disjunctive inequalities that continue to exist between distinct cultures, it also establishes a transnational *differentiation* that affirms “a multiplicity of subjects, constituted by relations of temporally-coded spatial difference, within a self-consciously coeval time” (“Global Modernity and the Contemporary” 83).¹⁶ It is precisely because of this dialectical dynamics between actual differentiation and projective unification that Osborne regards global modernity as an “operative fiction” that is nevertheless palpably real.

According to Osborne, global modernity thus continues – and perhaps even amplifies – the grand project first inaugurated by historical modernity (the era when the sworn belief in capitalist progression took shape). Yet it also alters the modalities by which the continued adherence to progress steers the era of globalized contemporaneity. Elucidating the difference between these two types of modernities, Osborne eventually resorts to the function of the image in contemporary culture:

If modernity projects a present of permanent transition, forever reaching beyond itself, the contemporary fixes or enfolds such transitoriness within the duration of a conjecture, or at its most extreme, the stasis of a present moment. Such presentness finds its representational form in the annihilation of temporality by the image. It is in the photographic and post-photographic culture of the image that the contemporaneity of the contemporary is most clearly expressed. The image interrupts the temporalities of the modern and nature alike. (Osborne, *Anywhere or Not at All* 24)¹⁷

For Osborne, it is the temporary stasis of the (post-)photographic image, together with the moment of presentness it provokes, that exemplifies the condition of contemporaneity, which is no longer geared towards a future-to-come, but rather takes the present as the sole measure for the constitution of historical time. “The present of the contemporary is becoming shorter and shorter,” Osborne writes (*ibid.*). It is especially this hallmark of contemporaneity that is visualized through photography’s supposed ability to provide a snapshot of reality, which seems to freeze the image beyond the ravages of time. In addition, with the digitalization of photography and its production of what Osborne calls post-photographic images, this condensation of time is even exacerbated, insofar as the translation of the image into binary codes has the effect that “time is not immobilized or engorged so much as obliterated” (130).

At this critical juncture, we are confronted with the limitations of Osborne’s view on contemporaneity and his suggestion that the standstill is the preeminent figure that defines the temporality of the present. For if we are to transfer Osborne’s stance on contemporaneity to the field of dance in general and to the practice of re-enactment in particular, it appears that his emphasis on the momentary stillness of the image as an interruption of modernity’s penchant for movement highlights only one side of contemporaneity’s alleged reconfiguration of modernity’s temporal structures. To elucidate this claim, it is useful to consider how also dance studies has devoted specific attention to stillness or to the so-

called “still-act,” which from the 1990s onwards began to play an increasingly prominent role in choreographic composition.¹⁸ Different theorizations of the meaning of stillness show that the same figure allows for diametrically opposed views on dance’s temporality, which suggests that stasis in itself is not sufficient to account for choreographic contemporaneity. In the section that follows, I will trace these divergent lines of thought in order to argue that the rise of re-enactment necessitates a revision of dance’s relationship with time and to re-introduce movement into the structure of contemporaneity.

Modernity and Movement

In dance studies, it is primarily André Lepecki’s 2006 book *Exhausting Dance* that offered one of the first and most thorough accounts of how predominant views on dance are indebted to the cultural legacy of nineteenth-century modernity. According to Lepecki, the common equation of dance with dynamic flow and uninterrupted movement can be traced back to modernity’s exalted glorification of mobility and progress as the vital forces that pushed the present towards the future.¹⁹ Contemporary choreographers, however, undermine the generally unquestioned belief that dance can be aligned with movement by introducing stillness, or the refusal to move, as a legitimate choreographic gesture. By means of the “still-act,” Lepecki argues, the dancer “initiates a performative critique of his or her participation in the general economy of mobility that informs, supports, and reproduces the ideological formations of late capitalist modernity” (16).

Next to disrupting the typically modernist penchant for continuous movement, the act of standing still also challenges habitual views on dance’s ontology. The persistent idea that dance is ephemeral because bodily movement can never be repeated exactly nor properly stored as a tangible archival relic is, according to Lepecki, brought to its zero-point from the moment the body stops moving. “It is the very notion of [the] present,” he writes, “as [a] series of forever lost ‘nows’ that can no longer be sustained” (130). But insofar as the immobile body suspends the continuity of both movement and perception, it also allows for other temporalities to erupt, disclosing the multiple times that always already undergird dance, even if it appears to be bound to the present.²⁰ From this perspective, when contemporary dance opposes modernity’s imperative to continue moving towards an unknown and arguably hopeful future, it exposes how dance’s contemporaneity stems from – as Peter Osborne would phrase it – “a coming

together of *different but equally 'present' temporalities*" (Anywhere or Not at All 17).

Despite Lepecki's valuable attempt to complicate current understandings of dance's temporality, his emphasis on the still-act seems to provide merely one possible perspective on how the present of performance might be infused with other times. Moreover, and more troubling, the same starting point can be easily recuperated within a discourse that sees the expressive gesture of stillness as a sign of dance's unique and unilateral relationship with time. In his 2009 essay "Scène and Contemporaneity" dance scholar Frédéric Pouillaude provides a poignant example of this recuperation that assigns an entirely different function to the so-called still-act.

For Pouillaude, the introduction of stillness is part of a larger tendency he calls "the reflective work of performance" (131), which marks the heightened interest amongst choreographers to question the constitutive principles of the medium dance. Pouillaude regards this "reflective work" as a "mutation" of choreographic practice, one that "would be neither modern nor postmodern," but rather "*contemporary*, in an extra- or parahistorical sense" (134). This "extra- or parahistorical" contemporaneity of choreography is, according to Pouillaude, not grounded in the dancing body as such, but rather – as indicated by the title of his essay – an effect of the body's appearance on the theatrical scene. Based on the assumption that the scene enables the "coexistence" of living bodies, or the "explicit exchange between performers and onlookers (*regardants*)" (127), Pouillaude proposes an understanding of contemporaneity that is not related to "an historical figure, an epoch," but instead points to a more abstract "structure of temporality," which in the case of dance consists of "a neutral simultaneity" (*ibid.*). It is, in other words, the mere being together in time that constitutes the contemporaneity characteristic of choreography.²¹

Pouillaude's grasping on stillness as a sign of dance's "extra- or parahistorical" contemporaneity amounts to nothing less than a reversal of Lepecki's argument. Whereas stillness, for Lepecki, opens up towards the multiple temporalities of choreography, Pouillaude considers the very same gesture as an inward strategy that is primarily concerned with dance's own mediality and which seems to place choreography outside or above history.²² Pouillaude's understanding of contemporaneity thus bears no relationship at all with the formative and arguably continued influence of modernity on contemporary choreography. As such, he appears to corroborate Fredric Jameson's fierce plea for replacing the incessant

obsession with modernity for what he, in his 2002 book *A Singular Modernity*, terms “the ontology of the present.”

Such an ontology of the present, Jameson explains, “would not only wish to register the forces of past and future” and the manner in which they are thought to influence the present, but it “would also be intent on diagnosing, as I am, *the enfeeblement and virtual eclipse* of these forces within our current present” (*A Singular Modernity* 214; italics added).²³ Key to Jameson’s diagnose that only the present provides the purview of our time is his premise that modernity can stand as a synonym for capitalism. To the extent that capitalism fosters the homogenization of time and space through its relentless imperative for a maximized and globalized circulation of money, modernity can be seen to dissolve into postmodernity and even into what is currently called contemporaneity. From this perspective, time can indeed only be self-enfolding, if not flattening, rather than being able to enclose other times.

One possible way out of the temporal deadlock that Jameson seems to be construing is to read his book as an implicit response to Shmuel Noad Eisenstadt’s often-quoted essay “Multiple Modernities” (2000). In contrast to Jameson, who tends to level out synchronic differences under the diachronic banner of capitalism, Eisenstadt argues that “the actual developments in modernizing societies have refuted the homogenizing and hegemonic assumptions of this Western program of modernity” (1). Broadening the scope beyond the West, Eisenstadt observes that, in spite of the perhaps common aim to seek for prosperity through modernization, the overarching project of modernity has developed at various paces in different parts of the world, including “attempts at ‘de-Westernization,’ depriving the West of its monopoly on modernity” (24).²⁴ While Eisenstadt’s emphasis on the multiplicity of modernity might seem quite obvious, it has important implications for the manner in which modernity is historicized as well as for the function temporality might play within our allegedly “present” era of contemporaneity. What Eisenstadt aims to undermine is the idea that “the modern project, at least in terms of the classical formulation that held sway for the last two centuries, is exhausted” (3). While this apparent exhaustion has prompted Francis Fukuyama to proclaim the “end of history,” Eisenstadt opposes that “the trends of globalization show nothing so clearly as the *continual reinterpretation* of the cultural program of modernity” (24; italics added).²⁵

It is interesting to note that the title of André Lepecki's book, *Exhausting Dance*, gives expression to the very same kind of exhaustion that Eisenstadt detects in the ongoing discussions on modernity and history. However, by countering the alleged exhaustion of modernity with a dynamics of "continual reinterpretation," Eisenstadt offers an opportunity to rethink the temporality of contemporaneity. This seems especially important in light of current debates on contemporaneity, which tend to foreground its distinctive newness, at the expense of its relationship with other previous times that is nevertheless regarded as its constitutive feature. As Keith Moxey observes in his critique on Terry Smith's claim that contemporaneity defies periodization, the underlying assumption is that "history has come to an end," leading to a "perspective [that] eliminates not only differences among moments in time but also the possibility that there might be other ways of telling time" (44). In other words, the irony of the increased attention for what might constitute contemporaneity is that it slips into a peculiar *de*-temporalized view that, by renouncing the possibility of periodization, dispenses with temporality altogether. "A featureless contemporaneity," Moxey writes, "registers differences in neither time nor culture" (*ibid.*).

Retrieving Time

"We cannot not periodize," Fredric Jameson posits in *A Singular Modernity* (29), obviously echoing his earlier dictum in *The Political Unconscious* (1981) that one must "always historicize" (ix). What remains unclear, however, is how we are to historicize the so-called era of contemporaneity, given that periodization is precisely the tendency that contemporaneity is said to defy. We are, in other words, left with a double bind that ties contemporaneity to a contemporary condition that, through the very gesture of molding together different times, becomes *timeless*.

It is here, perhaps, where the conspicuous return to modernity in dance by means of re-enactment becomes most meaningful, revealing its potential to recalibrate the experience of time in times of contemporaneity. For if modernity marks a decisive change in the experience of time, the re-doubling of this experience in choreographic re-enactment aims to hark back to as well as to push forward the temporality that conditions dance, both modern and contemporary. The deliberate intention to put the history of dance back onto the stage, by re-living, re-inventing, and re-embodying works from the past, proposes a different attitude to the possible persistence of the past within the present, not only because it illuminates how the present of dance is always already infused by historical traces,

but also – and more importantly – because it demonstrates how dance is able *to historicize the current cultural condition we are tempted to call “contemporaneity.”* Rather than reinforcing the idea that history has ended, choreographic re-enactment inaugurates a renewed beginning – or, rather, a continued recommencement – of history. From this point of view, the apparent appeal of modern dance for contemporary choreographers might reside in the fact that it provides one possible entrance to elucidate, in a decidedly preposterous manner, the kind of temporality that connects our so-called contemporaneity with historical modernity.

Most concretely, re-enactments of modern dance signal, above all, that the previously predominant emphasis on expanding movement idioms by means of still-acts – or, more generally, through the pervasive use of release techniques, improvisation, or other methods geared towards physical relaxation – is on the rebound, giving way to other registers of bodily expression, such as physical tension, theatricality, or flowing movement. This begs the question as to what this (re-)turn towards a supposedly out-dated choreographic aesthetics of moving and appearing on stage means from a broader cultural perspective. According to Ramsay Burt, the dancing bodies of modern choreographers, such as Martha Graham or Mary Wigman, can be called “alien bodies,” since they reinserted – amongst other things – a degree of “primitivism in the arts” as a response to the fact that “modernity undermined ideologies of national identity” and therefore “created needs for new definitions of origins” (14). These alien bodies thus reflected the alienation that people themselves might feel in modernizing societies, producing a certain recognition through the display of strangeness. It might certainly be that a similar search for roots is what draws contemporary choreographers to the tradition of modern dance and that re-staging this legacy corresponds to the alienation people now might feel in a globalized world. On further thought, however, there seems to be a more complex temporal dynamics at work in choreographic re-enactment: while a return to the roots of dance still suggests a rather linear going-back to the past of dance as it once has been, the re-enactment of historical dance works is rather concerned with the incongruous congruence of different times. Put otherwise, rather than wanting to restore origins (or, at least, the feeling thereof), re-enactment is about time as such.²⁶

Modernity is known as the era in which the experience of time becomes notoriously ambiguous: as the past loses its formative function, the present becomes the measure of all things, even while it is geared towards the future. With re-enactment, the weight of the past is obviously revalued, but only to

exacerbate the ambiguity of temporality that was already present in modernity and which is now turned into a condition of so-called contemporaneity. In this respect, if we follow André Lepecki's argument that modernity inaugurated the equation of dance with flowing movement and if one of the defining characteristics of contemporary dance is that it has defied this alignment through the introduction of still-acts or other ordinary gestures, then we are impelled to consider the possibility that the emergence of choreographic re-enactment marks a transition from contemporary dance to what can be called *contemporaneous dance*, even if this might imply a somewhat improper use of the word "contemporaneous" that broadens its meaning beyond common parlance.

"Belonging to the same time or period," is the first definition the *Oxford English Dictionary* gives for the entry "contemporaneous," but the most significant addition is that the word also denotes "existing or occurring at the same time."²⁷ This second meaning suggests that, next to the conventional usage of "contemporaneous" as a signifier of a singular time, it might also include the occurrence of different times "at the same time." While this is in line with Peter Osborne's theorization of contemporaneity, we could push his ideas further by re-inserting modernity as the interval that re-enactment tries to restore and to rethink. Looking back from the perspective of contemporaneity at the work of pioneering modern dancers, such as Loie Fuller, Mary Wigman, or Vaslav Nijinsky, the avant-gardistic aspirations that propelled their practice become a function of the past, rather than an anticipation of the future. This means that we are at a point in time where we are able to reconsider the drive towards innovation that we have inherited from modernity and which continues to haunt us up until today. The fact that dance re-enactments such as Fabián Barba's *A Mary Wigman Dance Evening* or Faustin Linyekula's *Création du monde* present not only moving bodies – since, obviously, the moving body has never been entirely absent from choreographic practice – but also use the body to put history into motion, suggest that the contemporaneity of dance might consist precisely in being contemporaneous, as a coming together of times, rather than in its upholding of the label "contemporary" as the primary token of being up-to-date and in pace with the present.

My suggestion, then, to rethink contemporary dance as a practice of contemporaneous dance ultimately implies that contemporaneity can only be defined as a new period to the extent that it allows to look back on both modernity and postmodernity from the vantage point of a contemporaneous

perspective that shows how the past continues to move on, in the multiple sense of moving with us, through us, and beyond us.

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¹ On the blog page "Berichte aus dem Museum" (Messages from the Museum) of the Society for the Promotion of the Egyptian Museum Berlin, Dietrich Wildung recounts how he encountered Nannucci's work and how the phrase exemplified for him the Museum's intention to restore the connection between ancient art and contemporary times by developing new ways of exhibiting historical relics, artefacts, and artworks (Wildung 2004). To be entirely accurate, I should point out that the bust of Nefertiti was on display in the Altes Museum only between 2005 and 2009, when the Neues Museum (where the Egyptian Collection is normally housed) was being renovated.

² Clock time was officially introduced in 1884 at the Prime Meridian Conference in Washington, where delegates from twenty-five countries decided to equate the length of one day with twenty-four hours and to divide the globe into twenty-four time zones (Kern 12). According to Robert Hassan, the introduction of clock time constituted what he terms "the first empire of speed," as it led to an unprecedented acceleration of society (41-66).

³ Smith describes “postmodernity as a fate of the West (or, at least, of many parts and elements of it, but not the world,” claiming that it fails to “explain enough of what is happening in what remains of the West as the world migrates to it, everyone changing as they come and go.” This convinces him that “it might be time to grasp a more supple set of ways of being in time now and to shift to another set of terms,” which he finds in the notion of “contemporaneity” (“Contemporary Art” 702).

⁴ The clearest expression of this resurgent interest in the meaning of the label “contemporary art” is probably the “Questionnaire on ‘The Contemporary’” that was published in 2009 in the journal *October* and which asked critics and curators about their view on the implications of calling art “contemporary” (Foster). Since then, several edited volumes and other articles – some of which I will refer to throughout this text – have continued to pursue similar questions. The interest in the “contemporary” is, however, still growing, as indicated by the conference “The Contemporary Contemporary: Representations and Experiences of Contemporaneity” organized by the Aarhus University (Denmark) in June 2017.

⁵ Reflections on the temporality of performance have been re-galvanized by Rebecca Schneider’s *Performing Remains* (2011) and further explored in various other volumes (see, for instance, Jones and Heathfield; Grant et al.). Most recently, the terms seem to be shifting towards the idea of “contemporaneity,” as evidenced by the symposium organized by Ghent University (from which also my present contribution results) and the fact that also the last edition of the triennial German Tanzkongress (Dance Congress) took contemporaneity as its general theme (see <http://www.tanzkongress.de/en/home.html>).

⁶ For recent discussions on historical distance, see Phillips; den Hollander et al.; Kellner.

⁷ In *Literature, Modernism, and Dance* (2013), Susan Jones explains that modern dance’s innovations entailed more than the somewhat clichéd image of dancing on bare feet, since there are various formalist counterparts that were rather invested in abstracting movement, while also ballet itself was subjected to thorough revision by choreographers, such as Mikhail Fokine, who tried to purify it from the predominance of narrative (5-6; 88-89). Similar correctives to stereotyped ideas of modern dance can be found in the special issue of *Modernist Cultures* on “Modernism and Dance” (Preston).

⁸ The authoritative study on how modernity brought about an incisive reconfiguration of the experience of time is Reinhart Koselleck's *Vergangene Zukunft: Zur Semantik geschichtlicher Zeiten* (1979), which was translated in English only in 2004 as *Futures Past: On the Semantics of Historical Time*. After Koselleck, various authors have joined his project to probe the complexities of modernity's temporality (see, for instance, Doane; Fritzsche).

⁹ Smith has reiterated this claim at various other occasions. In *What is Contemporary Art?* (2012), he writes: "when it comes to considering the present and the future, periodization may no longer be possible" (256-257). And, more recently, in "Defining Contemporaneity" (2015), he asserts: "in contemporary conditions periodization is impossible" (160).

¹⁰ For a similar critique, see McLean (esp. 21-23) and Andrew McNamara's review essay.

¹¹ The notion of "modernity's waiting room" is one that Smith borrows from the Indian artist group RAQs Media Collective and which he defines as "an immobilized space, one that immobilizes all who enter it, a place of waiting for the next great art unifier, the next really big art story" (312).

¹² In "Currents of World-Making in Contemporary Art" (2011), Smith similarly defines "remodernism" as "the constant efforts of the institutions of Modern Art (now usually designated Contemporary Art) to reign in the impacts of contemporaneity on art, to revive earlier initiatives, to cleave new art to the old modernist impulses and imperatives, to renovate them" (180). Yet he also adds an important side note, clarifying that "remodernism, as I understand it, is not simply about tired repetition, or reluctant nostalgia, or even melancholy negation," since this would mean it is "in decline" (*ibid.*). Instead, the "remodernism" he thinks of is "alive" and can be discerned, albeit in a different way, in the art practice of Richard Serra, Jeff Wall, and Gerhard Richter (*ibid.*).

¹³ According to Fredric Jameson, whose writings on postmodernism have been extremely influential (see, e.g. Jameson 1984), pastiche is the quintessential postmodernist genre. In contrast to parody, which still presupposes a critical distance between the source material and the parody itself, pastiche amounts to a mere recycling of existing cultural forms that, by extension, also marks the decline of a genuine sense of history.

¹⁴ In *Anywhere or Not at All*, Osborne asserts that "art is a privileged cultural carrier of contemporaneity, as it was of previous forms of modernity" (27).

¹⁵ Amelia Jones makes a similar argument when she contrasts Marina Abramović's outward claims to physical, unmediated presence with Jeremy Deller's distributed use of documentation in video installations to re-present his famous 2001 re-enactment *The Battle of Orgreave* (24).

¹⁶ Osborne borrows the notion of "coeval time" from anthropologist Johannes Fabian, who first introduced it in *Time and the Other* ([1983] 2014). Defining "coevalness" as a condition of "shared Time," with a capital T (34), Fabian denounced the dominant tendency in anthropology to maintain a "(temporal) distance" between researchers and the object of research, a distance he deemed both untenable and unproductive (31). Fabian's idea of coevalness has been widely picked up in postcolonial studies, a field that also has an important influence on current debates on contemporaneity (see, for example, Bevernage). What I am unfortunately not able to address here is the relationship between (post-)colonialism, contemporaneity, and choreographic re-enactment, even though choreographers such as Fabián Barba and Faustin Linyekula use re-enactment as an artistic strategy to criticize the division between center and periphery in historical as well as contemporary dance, exposing how this differentiation is a legacy we still carry with us from the modern period of colonization. For a further exploration of these questions, see Fabián Barba's contribution to this issue.

¹⁷ In "Global Modernity and the Contemporary," Osborne presents a similar claim. Here, he writes that, "if modernity projects a present of permanent transition, the contemporary *fixes* or *enfolds* such transitoriness within the *actuality* of spatially distributed conjunctures." In other words, "in contrast to modernity's temporal differentiation within a unified space," contemporaneity is defined by the seemingly incommensurable pair of "temporal unity/spatial disjunction" (81; italics added). It is precisely this conundrum that artistic re-enactment contests by showing how "spatial disjunction" is not necessarily covered up by a "temporal unity," but rather gives rise to different experiences of temporality that might be the only genuine sense of contemporaneity.

¹⁸ Stillness as a dance gesture has been explored by various choreographers, such as Jérôme Bel, La Ribot, Estzer Salomon, Xavier Le Roy, Maria Hassabi, and many others.

¹⁹ In *Poetics of Dance* ([1995] 2015), dance scholar Gabriele Brandstetter reiterates the common equation of modernity's most essential features with choreographic movement. Referring to Baudelaire's famous characterization of modernity as "the ephemeral, the fugitive, the contingent" ('La modernité, c'est le transitoire, le fugitif, le contingent'), Brandstetter states that his claim "simultaneously describes the art of dance," insofar as "the transitory, the ephemeral is a fundamental, idiosyncratic feature of dance as an especially revealing example of the performing arts" (21).

²⁰ Lepecki develops a similar, though slightly different view on the conjunction of different temporalities in dance in his 2010 essay "The Body as Archive." Drawing on Deleuze's ideas on virtuality and Foucault's notion of dispersion, he considers choreographic reenactment as a passing on and a re-actualization of virtual potentialities that were not realized yet in a work's past stagings.

²¹ In emphasizing that "coexistence" is both the temporal and phenomenal condition of the theatrical scene, Pouillaude is echoing theatre scholar Erika Fischer-Lichte, who claimed that the constitutive feature distinguishing the performing arts from other art forms is "the bodily co-presence of actors and spectators" (2008, 32). Both Fischer-Lichte and Pouillaude seem to be reaching back to Lessing's *Laocoon* (1766), the treatise in which he introduced his infamous distinction between time-based arts and space-based arts. As such, they deny time not only the ability to cross between different media, but also the potential to go back and forth between the past, the present, and the future.

²² It should be noted that, more recently, Pouillaude has slightly revised his thinking on contemporaneity, primarily due to a tendency he terms "documentary dance," which relates more explicitly to an extra-theatrical reality and therefore complicates his previous tying of dance's temporality to the present of the scene (see Pouillaude "Dance as Documentary").

²³ Even though Jameson's *A Singular Modernity* seems to be far removed from Peter Osborne's definition of contemporaneity as the disjunctive coming-together of times, there are a few remarkable commonalities. When Osborne claims that the momentary standstill of the (post-)photographic picture signifies the eradication of temporality, he appears to reinforce the Jamesonian standpoint that capitalism tends to flatten time. Also Osborne's assertion that "the disjunctiveness of presentness" constitutes an "existential unity" (*Anywhere or Not at All*, 25) brings him closer to Jameson than one might expect at first sight.

²⁴ Eisenstadt's standpoint is close to Dipesh Chakrabarty's *Provincializing Europe* ([2000] 2008), in which he seeks to attenuate the presumed supremacy of Western modernity, not by simply erasing the differences between the West and the non-West, but rather by proposing to "create conjoined and disjunctive genealogies" that acknowledge the importance of Europe's intellectual legacy for critical thinking and simultaneously "contemplate the necessarily fragmentary histories of human belonging that never constitute a one or a whole" (255).

²⁵ Eisenstadt's notion of "continual reinterpretation" could be extended to dance by means of Helen Thomas's view in *Dance, Modernity and Culture* (1995) that modern dance emerged through a dynamics of what she terms "cultural reproduction" (55-83).

²⁶ Even though I am arguing that re-enactment is about time as such, it is obviously impossible to separate this from the dimension of space, not the least because the idea of contemporaneity draws together different experiences of temporality at various places in a globalized world. In this sense, one way to broaden the discussion I am only broaching in this text would be to consider the ways in which choreographic re-enactment invites to map what can be called a "geography of time."

²⁷ *OED Online*. Oxford University Press, September 2016. Accessed 28/11/2016 at www.oed.com