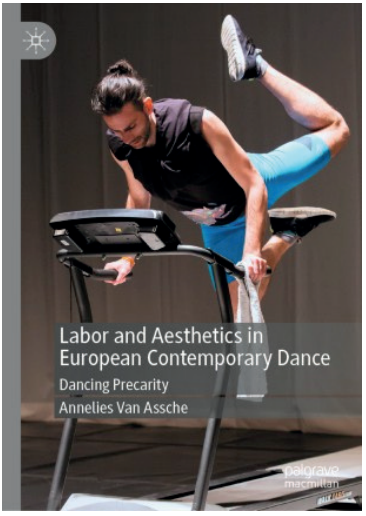
VAN ASSCHE, Annelies.

Labor and Aesthetics in European Contemporary Dance. Dancing Precarity.



Palgrave Macmillan,
2020. 293 p.
(ISBN 978 3 030 40692 9)

The book *Labor and Aesthetics in European Contemporary Dance. Dancing Precarity* (Palgrave Macmillan 2020) by Annelies Van Assche represents a rich and mature look at the intersection between labour and aesthetics in contemporary dance art.

The book explores working and living conditions of contemporary dance artists in Brussels and Berlin through two interconnected macro-planes. Firstly, by exploring what came to be known as project-based work in our contemporary neoliberal society. And secondly, by portraying the (cruel) logic of neoliberal society at large. In doing so, the book is probing the term "precarity", an already much discussed term in the humanities and social sciences, whose relevance for understanding the conditions of work and life in contemporary capitalism cannot be overlooked. The book presents a vast amount of literature on precarity with vigour and clarity.. Furthermore, this book performs the theoretical groundwork for further interdisciplinary research by combining a rich tapestry of sources coming from dance studies, performance studies and social sciences.

The book is organized in several *threefolds*. The first one is a very well-developed and unique threefold methodology. To begin with, the book combines qualitative research through questionnaires (*first fold*) and qualitative research through ethnography (*second fold*). Finally, as the *third fold*, the book analyses several dance performances that address

precarity in order to further explore and deepen its ethnographic account. Having such a precise methodology allowed the author to venture into much detail on the working and living conditions of the contemporary dance artists in the two cities.

The first part of the book discusses the peculiar work ethic developed in the performing arts sector which the author explores through two models: "Lifestyle Artists" and "Survival Artists". The first model refers to the bohemian ethos that dates from nineteenth-century Romanticism and that somehow gives moral satisfaction and a sense of accomplishment that often obscures or at least is concomitant with hard and impoverished living conditions. This is exemplified by the following dancer's statement: "I'm a lifestyle artist, and that to me is a huge form of remuneration. I'm not willing to sacrifice that for another career. So maybe I could have a different career where I make more money, but I wouldn't" (75).

This model of artistic work emphasises the perceived freedom and creativity connected to the profession, and a willingness to sacrifice more stable professional options. On the other hand, "Survival Artists" seem to be consider precarity as the main feature of their work and life. In a condensed phrase, "Hopefully I'll die before I retire" (84), which emphasises the grim reality of the project work most contemporary dancers today live by.

The crux of the argument that the book develops is that both models are equally important in creating a unique work ethic that is pertinent to artistic labour in general and is also highly compatible with the demands of flexible capitalism. This is why contemporary dance artists could be seen as perfect working subjects of neoliberal work ideology. The second part of the book takes us to Berlin and Brussels where we get to know the dance artists through the above-mentioned 'second threefold' namely: the "Fast", the "Mobile" and the "Flexible". These are the main modi operandi of contemporary dance scenes. These refer to the fast production rates coupled with the relatively short lives of created pieces; they portray dance artists as quintessential globetrotters, always on the move, and with a very flexible and multifaceted skillset. This part is ethnographic in nature and explores theoretical issues by using the voices of dance artists themselves. We encounter dance artists in their studio and home environments and we experience the vulnerability of their precarious lives.

This part also offers some new terms and expressions that enrich the debate on precarity such as, for instance, the term "human time". The beauty of this term is that it comes from the "field" itself and represents a true research gem. The third part of the book gives us the analysis of several "performances of precarity", combining ethnographic data with

the established tools of performance analysis. Although these analyses greatly enrich the discussion of ethnographic data, this part could have explored some of the avenues opened up by the account of the performers themselves. For instance, what I found somewhat lacking in this part and the book as a whole is a discussion or clarification of some frequently used terms such as "physicality", "movement" and even "dance", which the informants use to describe what they do in their performances.

This may seem unnecessary; however, I believe that grappling with these difficult terms may lead us to a more robust discussion about what is happening to (dancers') bodies in neoliberal capitalism, which puts an emphasis on cognitive labour.

Finally, I somewhat missed the "bigger picture" especially at the very end of the book. Although the author quite openly states that: "The added value of this book is that it scientifically reports the way the dance sector operates from a microperspective and provides a dance scholarly and sociological interpretation of its mechanisms by coupling the qualitative data (interview material, observations, logbooks) and the dance performances to theoretical insights" (279), I believe it still does not 'get it off the hook' when it comes to broader theoretical issues. If the freelance dance artists are indeed "Guinea Pigs for the New Economy", what are the outcomes of this experiment? The first thing that comes to mind is the fact that dance artists developed numerous survival strategies but very little if any resistance strategy. It's like they constantly operate on the shifting sands where any resistance (such as a strategy of slowing down) sooner or later becomes co-opted by neoliberalism. The book very cautiously suggests *commoning* practices and solidarity as a way to go for dance artists, but also admits that these practices are still very rare and that "chasing its own tail" still represents a very individualistic endeavor. For me, and perhaps this is added gloom caused by the pressure on arts caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, the question today is: why dance? Why still study dance artists at all? The book concludes that there are still more avenues for research but the author, like the dancers themselves, by her own admission constantly needs more time. My question is: What is "enough time"? What if we have run out of time already?

DUNJA NJARADI