

## my favorite velvet shirt

/ asya ashman & milena sundari nowak / april 11, 2021 / published by asya ashman / leave a comment

which was with me when I danced and cried, back home and here  
it has a hole and a cut off collar  
today it sent me a message  
that nothing is random



my closet is a stage, my bookshelf as well

leave a comment

Spring of 2021. Under the motto “Keeping on dancing through times of physical distancing” this year’s A.PART Festival grounds itself in the pleasures and challenges of encounter(s).

The curatorial team - Julek Kreutzer, Alex Hennig, Diethlid Meier in collaboration with Gabi Beier / Ada Studios - has invited 12 artists, both students and alumni of Berlin dance schools<sup>1</sup> who were granted a small fee and an assigned partner to engage with their own research over the period of two months. Young dance artists trained in various techniques - from urban dance, circus, ballet to contemporary dance were set in exchange with each other to figure out a way of working together, while coming to terms with what they individually were working on, how to do it and for the sake of what. Apart from their partner’s presence, each of the artists was offered support and advice of the curatorial team and access to the blog which stands for a sharing platform for each of the artistic couples.

If dancing is always being grounded in the body’s sociality, one can perhaps never really dance (a) solo. Building relations, their recomposition and transformation seem to be a potent underlayer of dancing and as such it comes into the foreground when dancers around the world find themselves acutely restrained from the physical contact and must re-orient their relational and creative strategies. That radical reorientation has to handle some new body-mind experiences: zoom fatigue, alienation and sensorial deprivation, nomadic lifestyle temporarily replaced by the inability to settle in one’s mind under the bombardment of the digital content, and finally, the slippage of dancing into the spheres of the screen mediated exchanges and more often than not, into a digital void.

Re-choreographing oneself in the Now is challenged by the productive pressure of the funding bodies ( and small managers inside of us) confronted with the exhaustion of artists rescheduling, re-thinking and transforming how they work and how they communicate that work. Present transition brought some new opportunities in regards to accessibility and meeting points at the online platforms, yet it has also, at least in my view, emphasized a

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<sup>1</sup> Students and alumni taking part in the Festival come from the educational programmes of HZT Berlin, Tanzfabrik, Die ETAGE, Balance 1, Berlin Dance Institute

significance of the material base, e.g. space for movement or resources to enable a creative process in the first place, not to mention the condition of the body-mind itself being a motor for the production of dance which often stands, next to the poetry, as the most ephemeral of arts. There is however no dancing without a complex netting of co-operation supported by the very material labor of bodies articulating, testing, connecting. A.PART Festival's offering seems to be busy with such questions of co-operation and exchange and it grounds its curatorial frame in the *patch-working*. The resulting blog is not really an end product of multiple processes of the invited artists, but an invitation to read through the choir of voices and perspectives that together constitute something of a diary of the creative process. Often confessional and personal tone of the contributions, as well as the freshness of artistic outcomes and tryouts ask for a soft-paw approach. Where the artists are immersed in the process of making something, I suggest we join them in such a processual sensitivity and look at the stitches, stumbles and revelations with curiosity and openness.

Back in the early 1990s, Karen J. Warren, a scholar of *ecofeminisms* (as there are many rather than one), proposed a quilt-ing metaphor as a way of theory-making. Quilt on one hand indicates layering - it has a top layer design, backing and batting, and on the other hand the top layer is a horizontal patchwork of elements brought together by quilting stitches done by "betweens" needles. Design of a quilt emphasizes both 'evenness' of perspectives/materials and tensions between them. Variety of voices, experiences and desires constitute an ecofeminist quilt while the ecofeminism(s) in itself is a quilt, bending the notions of expertise and power, and their redistribution. Within ecofeminist philosophy women's voices are sewn into a larger scope of relations - into the ecology of worldly matters on which the communal inter-specie *survivance*<sup>2</sup> relies. Such work often termed as 'reproductive' and therefore 'feminized' is not in fact, and should not be, a domain of women. Creation and maintenance of social relations and culture at large is OUR work and it cannot be done in isolation. Finding freedom and collective realization in play and cooperation with others might be a nightmare of a mythological self-sustainable capitalist, and precisely because of that, if we desire to change how we work and interact with each other, we shall all allow similar haunting to take over our working paradigms.

And why am I engaging with such a risky balancing on a thin line of essentialism, women's rights and ecology? Because I do see a quilting spirit in the A.PART Festival's proposal and I would like to bring it as a strategy in decoding its offerings by weaving a pattern of one's own from the multiplicity of voices, movements and questions raised by the artists of this year's festival. Quilting work in writing and choreographing originates from the encounter with the other(s), it requires a dismantling of categories that prevent us from speaking to each other, and prevent us from learning. Such aesthetic, conceptual, and ultimately social, operations require a caring approach as does curating which in itself has entered a new field of trouble and possibility on the historic occasion of the COVID-19 pandemic. The pressing question seems to be how to enable work and development at the moment of transition and

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<sup>2</sup> Here I would like to propose one more way of thinking of narrating one's story and of narrating the world through perspectives different from the Western imperial dominance, to bring attention to how the question of survival resonates with the societies, cultures, peoples who have lived through the apocalypse of sorts already. Cultural theorist Gerald Vizenor has used the term *survivance* when writing about Anishinaabe peoples of North America (*Manifest Manners: Postindian Warriors of Survivance*, 1999). The exact meaning of the term is debated as *survival* is entangled with *endurance*, *resistance* and *or vitality*. As such, the term seems crucial when thinking of the transformation of power paradigms and global perseverance in the face of colonial, late capitalist rule and in the era of planetary dying-out.

suspension of the scene as we know it. How to enable artistic exchange and space of experimentation also for those artists who are about to enter the so called art market, that are at the beginning of their careers? How to continuously reschedule, reshape and, at the same time, not give in to the doom of alienation and isolation but to insist on remaining in a dialogue and creative process even if with limited means?

When scrolling through the A.PART's blog I was invited to the space where ideas emerge, are tested, mediated, set in relation and released to be examined, responded to, questioned. Quite a vulnerable space that is and a risky gesture of inviting a stranger into a land of one's experimentation without any promise of reward or connection in the digital theatre. I will then attempt to respond with care and guide you through a journey that unfolded there for me and through the dreams, confessions and aspirations that I have found blinking in the net of A.PART's choreographic blog.

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So, why don't we start with an **INVOCATION** ?

In their first post on April 1st **Franziska Doffin and Tatjana Mahlke** initiated their process with a bit of poetry.

*Hanging around duty*  
*Lean wildly somewhat*  
*Fragmented hopes upwards and*  
*Out to the open landscape*

Sounds like a familiar state and/or place where a creative process is about to be unleashed. Their blog thread manifests a potential of exchange between urban and contemporary dance, both artists proposing different approach and movement language inviting us to see how the 'betweens' of various techniques evoke new directions for one's dancing and how we can honor and cherish the presence of other dancer in our own cosmos of movement explorations. Practicing together and witnessing each other's tryouts has always been a growth strategy in dancing as I have experienced it myself - growing in the company of others, with them rather than at their expense. Not just Tatjana and Franziska work at the crossroads of aesthetics and movement traditions as it is generally one of the most important traits in the curatorial proposal of A.PART Festival - bringing together, stitching various orders of knowing-dancing to find a way out of institutional isolation of each represented school and a way out of contemporary dance's monopoly on ... contemporaneity.

# WELCOME TO MY PLAYGROUND



There on the tree, a body hanging over a branch! A body hanging in bed, a body on the forest floor, face covered with moss. Flowers in bloom, rite of spring performed by Teletubbies.

Dance has been historically bound to play, and as such is closer to labor than work, for dancing escapes immediacy of a product. Artists have been often viewed as those who *do not work* mostly because they play, they *waste* time. And time is money under the capitalist paradigm, monetization encompasses by now both time at work and time off-work, the latter being actually rather a unicorn than reality for many who are working within the projective horizon of artist-entrepreneur. As much as the pandemic must have felt like an entrapment to many of us, it has possibly revealed some of the discontents in regards to how we work and how we dance.

*How we spend our days is of course, how we spend our lives.  
What we do with this hour, and that one, is we we are doing.*<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Annie Dillard, *The Writing Life*, First HarperPerennial edition, New York, 1990, p.32.

*Artists in the West are not lazy and therefore are not artists but rather producers of something.....* <sup>4</sup>

Spending time on not really doing anything in particular or stretching it into the process of writing, choreographing, wandering, contemplating, friends making can bring some relief from the acceleration of daily life and the pressure to present the outer world, or the feudal lord, with a graspable outcome of one's energy spending.



<sup>4</sup> Mladen Stilinović, *In Praise of Laziness*, 1993.

<http://monumenttoformation.org/atlas-of-transformation/html//laziness/in-praise-of-laziness-mladen-stilinovic.html>

Laziness in the words of Mladen Stlinović consists of several virtues of not-doing, it is a *dumb time*, a space where nothing is commodified or achieved. Teachings of the (socialist) East are brought in to express the necessity of an artist to focus on art as different from being a producer of things, an ambitious manager of self and/or the professional provocateur. *Artists from the East (... ) Even when they did produce art, they knew it was in vain, it was nothing.* Nothingness of such art does not come from its aesthetic or conceptual poverty but rather from the lack of market which can fabricate all the processes of value production and art evaluations, which actually mean nothing until we agree that they mean something. I am bringing this classical text as I was reminded of its questions when reading the blog. The very function of art and the position of an artist within a society calls for a continuous re-thinking, especially that around me the calls for *more process and less product* proliferate. Perhaps socialism has something to teach us not only about leisure and non-work but the very relation between work and life and how it translates into the *work of art*.

Both from the visual content and from writing present at the blog, for example in the thread of **Camile Jemelen and Sofia Seta** the paradoxical relationship between leisure and work can be sensed. Artists invite a viewer into their bed, into their basement, into their head.

the only premise of those sessions were: **get your monsters out –**



Confessions on a dancefloor, dancing for the sake of self-realization and -cognition and simultaneously a radiation, an extension, an attempt to touch *things*. If dancing is always somewhat an effort to relate and mobilize, we might see it as a useful weapon at

the moment of an apocalypse. A sense of the end of the world is being intertwined with the engagement with dancing and reclaiming of joy that comes with it. Playfulness is central to overcoming paralysis, release is where we're heading.

When pondering about the joy of dancing at the end of the world, Sofia Seta reminds us of a classic DV8 movie "The Cost of Living" and I am immediately catapulted to my own beginnings and my first dance fascinations, but also to the moment when dance gave me a sense of limitless possibilities. Happy times. Perhaps, to escape bitterness that may come with professionalisation in one's art and confrontation with the production regimes thereof, we should insist on the joyous nature of dancing, we should reclaim dance as a way towards collective liberation and constitution of an assembly that never forgets the pleasure and play as its founding mothers.

We are however not engaging with dance solely for the sake of pleasantries and momentous releases. Dancing can support our development as individuals and communities, champion a healthy psychosomatic growth and overcoming of fear. That's at least a direction set by **Merle Gebauer & Tabea Antonacci**.



Both artists confront us with the sense of fear, insecurity, with being unwell. As they do so within the context of a dance field such confrontations bring possibly a rupture to the land of the strong and beautiful and the never-sick movement artists and their always fit and sane choreographers. Dance is proposed as a practice which can support one in overcoming those feelings, affects and discontents which are produced not so much by our individual biographies and struggles but rather by social structuring of the neoliberal capitalism. Alienation from oneself and other human and more-than-human companions as well as the lack of control over the narratives and outcomes of one's labor are fabricated for the sake of social control and subsequent normalization of the so-called cultural producers. Insisting on dancing can be proposed as a way towards oneself and others under a different relational paradigm. Dancing then should be a practice of articulating of self but also of encountering those who are not me and letting them transform me and my dancing. Posing questions, setting intentions and allowing oneself to admit to un-wellness may unfold a new field of collaboration and alliances. To state that one is sick, burnout, bored or lazy and to claim one's right to be received as such without scrutiny is already an act of courage. Shifting the direction of movement of values and bodies can take us away from choreopolice toward choreopolitics.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Andre Lepecki writes about a difference between the two in his text from 2013 *Choreopolice and Choreopolitics: or, the task of the dancer*. I borrow his conceptual frame and transform it a bit to apply it onto the description of movement that occurs between the very conditions for the movement/dance itself and the formation of the community within the dance market. Here, the main premise will be that (choreo)policing has something to do with ordering of movement and controlling of its organization, direction, etc. while *choreopolitics* would stand for an act of rupturing such flow, introducing a shift, blockage, transformation of order.

**We want to start our blog with creating a virtual image of the two characters that is going to unfold on this blog. Someone is making it, someone is reading it.**

Spatial limitation has brought not only the need for dancing but learning new skills or deepening relations with other artistic media. **Zoë Lazos and Matilde Flor Usinger** present us with a question of boredom and opportunity that comes from it. They attempt to build a stage for themselves using *what is there*. That in itself can be very familiar to a dancer, improvisation and responding to the space as it is are a part of the training. Zoë and Matilde build a thread of videos, drawings, writings expressing their fantasies and longings to connect, to touch, to project oneself and be received by others or re-imagined by them. Each artistic gesture becomes a possible relation, the invitations are plentiful, and once in a while it really is great to touch a tree or stroke moss with your cheek.

**We just blended a picture of your face**

**Into a picture of my face.**

**(...)**

**It feels funny.**

It is not only the *natural world* that we should be stroking, however. When looking at the thread of **Asya Ashman** and **Milena Sundari Nowak** I have felt a warm ray of companionship unfolding between the newly made colleagues. Here again the sense of collaboration seems vital to the process of making things on one's own while joining in the process of others, and oneself being accompanied and supported in any individual artistic endeavors. It is also interesting to see and speculate how some individual ideas and practices might have expanded thanks to the introduction of a partner and how possibly a third space, the between space, has emerged as a playground for the two. We see Asya and Milena hanging out and dialoguing and I am yet again travelling back to my own sort of beginning when in the absence of a performance/ research partner I have made one up to further explore that absence-presence paradoxes with my actual friends and audiences who stepped in that playful ground with me.<sup>6</sup> Having a buddy, a friend, a companion is essential to play and to dancing itself, as I was trying to argue for at the beginning of this text.

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<sup>6</sup> I am talking about the "Hi Mary" project which I have started while still studying at HZT Berlin in 2013. A made-up partner for that years-long process of waiting and preparing/ holding a space for someone's (her) arrival was Holy Mary, who never actually appeared... or did she?





Play and dance have one more thing in common, which I would like to bring into the picture following the thread of **Iris Rosa Gravemaker** and **Milica Tančić**, namely the expansion of imagination. They propose to think of

*an extensive production of imagination, with characters constructed and intertwined by the logic of unconstricted creativity of a child*

We are once again reminded about the love for dancing, curiosity of a mover, shedding of premature judgement and fears as conditions for expanding one's horizons. We cannot of course simply reclaim a child within hoping that it will free us from the grownups reality of life at work. But if we replace certain romanticism in that regard with lucid exploration of limits and possibilities of our working routines, we might rediscover our child selves as great companions in our workplace transformation. Imagination has not escaped capitalist normalization but perhaps artists can be good at proposing a way out of such impasse.

What I have enjoyed about APART's blog is certainly the space of beginnings where starting over is always an option yet one can also dare to project oneself into the now and into the future. Where playfulness, determination and sincerity overshadow the pandemic gloom, we might start some future planning in regards to how the dance scene in Berlin can look and how it can work.



## EPILOGUE FOR A CAUSE

I had some further insight into the process of making this year's A.PART Festival through conversations with Julek Kreutzer and Alex Hennig. We have talked about tensions and co-operations that the project has mobilized. What can be a future for the Berlin dance scene if we take into account the variety of dancers being educated in the city? How are educational institutions responding to the existence of a particular dance market and subsequently the production schemes and career models that are offered to dance professionals in Berlin? How are the institutions that both give stage to dance and shape the scene stand with the interests of artists working in the field of dance and choreography? Is there an excess in the production of dance, is the scene exhausted, or does it need some fresh air, some re-thinking? How do we embrace the multiplicity of practices, techniques, aesthetics and legacies and allow this to shape a scene? What if the scene is grassroot-like, what if it really is about the process, about having time, about conversations? What if our work is to dance at no limits, to let dancing be understood at its own terms and all the love of dance, as pronounced by the artists of A.PART Festival, be a fuel and an inspiration for reshaping the ethics and aesthetics of the Berlin dance scene?

This of course leads us back to the question of work and back to quilt. If the 'evenness' of perspectives is to be achieved we must look at how education of dancers and choreographers is translated into the artistic work and who can work in the field shaped by the projective horizon of 'contemporary dance' in the first place. And further, how the work's structuring, institutions and artistic programmes, peer to peer relations, inclusion and exclusion produced by the work paradigm and the art market economies are at work and how those relationalities can be transformed for the common good of (people of) the scene, because why not, really.

Perhaps some sharing of resources and dialogue not only between artists but also institutions that educate and/or employ them would do. Sharing is probably sometimes what we least want to do with our scarce resources but *no guts no glory*. And we should also dare to ask for more resources and rights from the funding and governing bodies and on that basis seek expansion of the field. And yes there is perhaps certain excess in the cultural production and the overflow of aspiring dance professionals, and other generations of dancers who often remain marginalized and/or invisible, but maybe surplus is exactly the point and we need even more dancers and just other ways of doing dance that could accommodate such a potential. Maybe there is no point in arguing for the sake of systemic relevance of the field if we could agree to be past that conversation already. I personally wish we could afford a claim that dancing needs no legitimization and should be accessible to all bodies and peoples who want to step in the dance.

And as I am slowly arriving at the end of this text, I want to turn back again to ecofeminism and its teachings. Instead of universalizing, forcefully consensual perspectives on theory and world making the philosophy thereof proposes both a certain grounding in the world and, also, a process, a search for the commons and communities. It is rather a movement toward deboderization than a comfy insulation of the lookalikes. Shall we take that risk? And more importantly..

Would you dance like that?