

# Singular-Plurals in Contemporary Choreography: From Aesthetics to Social Aesthetics

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## Abstract

Staging processes and choreographies of contemporary dance and performance: do they have to be perceived as a mere passing of choreographic notations from a single choreographer to dancers who have to repeat them “mindlessly” (Laermans 2015, 196)? Or should these rather be discussed as a reciprocal situation providing aesthetic experiences for participants in a singular-plural mode? To put it differently: Might choreography have the capacity to create an environment for the refinement of a democratic grass-roots consciousness? In order to discuss these questions, I have adapted various scientific perspectives in my research (Julian, forthcoming, autumn 2021). The starting point of my studies lies in theatre studies based on comparative methods. Artistic practices are juxtaposed in order to highlight their specificity. In a second step—inspired by the discourse as developed in theatre studies (Tatari 2017; Ruhsam 2011)—I discussed staging processes in conjunction with an ontological principle as conceptualised by the philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy (2000): the specificity of *being-with* makes it possible to theorise a range of infinite possibilities and differences that evolve by the mere execution of movement patterns. The third perspective is based on sociological methods that were adapted in order to embed the staging process in real-life conditions. My consideration here is that only by knowing imbalances that may exist in social life we understand the dynamics unfolding throughout a group that gathers in order to create a piece. The fourth perspective I apply in this article is based on a method called the *aesthetic field* as conceived by the philosopher Arnold Berleant (1970): having similarities to *being-with* makes it possible to cover not merely human interactions and social conditions but also interactions and permeations with a thing world, such as architectures, a stage design, costumes. Thus, the thing world can be seen as co-choreographing the work.

## Innumerable Social Exchanges

In the contemporary dance and performance scene (based on the projects scrutinised so far, my focus is put on the U.S. and European sphere, which is partly connected to approaches from South America), we find innumerable inherited artistic practices that are based on reciprocal exchanges, let alone the practice of contact improvisation as developed by the U.S. choreographer Steve Paxton in the early 1970s. Their shared characteristic focuses on relationality, providing frames of perception that can be thought of as “singular plural”.

The search for a starting point for these developments turned out to be futile. Nevertheless, it is interesting to notice that already during the flourishing days of the Black Mountain College (1933–1957) near Asheville, North Carolina, there was ongoing experimentation with models of unconventional social interchanges in the field (Bourdieu, 1987) of art. These also included the relationship between teacher and student: a mechanical binary relation based on the dominant role of an active teacher and a subordinate, passive student (Berleant 2017, 13), which was to be overcome. Instead, interactions were meant to involve all participants, no matter what their position in this institution. Approaches like these gave rise to what was later called “environmental art” realised by artists such as Merce Cunningham, John Cage, and Yoko Ono, who were also associated with *Fluxus*. Their artistic approaches also inspired choreographers and dancers such as Simone Forti and Yvonne Rainer. In the early 1960s, they started to gather around the Judson Church in New York. Resulting from cooperation with visual artists and musicians, they went on to form the Judson Dance Movement, an artistic direction active until the mid-1970s.

One example out of the creative experiences in these years was the Continuous Project Altered Daily. This was conceptualised by Rainer as a series of rehearsals starting at the Whitney Museum in New York in 1970 (Siegmond 2006, 401–402). Unconventionally, it was not the final product, but the rehearsal process itself that was to be shown in front of an audience, thus creating a hybrid performative format. For my line of argument, it is important to note that this project still knows an initiator, namely Rainer, but—as the events progressed—a single will should be dispensed with, creating space for a multiplicity of voices. Among others through real life encounters in the context of festivals, this concept was passed from Rainer to a young generation of European choreographers who were just about to merge into a direction that would be called *conceptual dance* (Laermans 2015, 192). Its central characteristic consists of searching for a new way of creating a dance or performance piece by questioning conventions, such as music, light and the audience’s attention spans as previously applied in theatre. Experimental

formats emerged from this approach, combining the execution of a movement pattern in front of an audience while talking about what was being executed. For my line of argument, it was *conceptual dance's* focus on the working or staging process that proved relevant. Artists associated with this direction started to analyse the working structures applied throughout the group. It was hoped that a democratisation of the dance field could be fostered via a singular-plural mode of creative collaboration (Laermans 2015, 20–21). This also motivated a reorientation and re-enactment of practices developed in the context of the Black Mountain College or the Judson Dance Movement. For instance, it was Rainer's Continuous Project Altered Daily (starting 1970) that became one of the models that were literally continued, i.e., re-enacted by the young artists of a French group called Le Quatuor Albrecht Knust. Affected by these creative circles, Katrin Deufert and Thomas Plischke, a couple who in early 2000 fused to an artistic label Deufert + Plischke, developed a method called *Reformulieren*: this would become the central working mode for a piece called *Reportable Portraits* (2007, Figure 1), which they realised and rehearsed together with the co-choreographers Helena Golab, Hanna Sybille Müller and Benjamin Schoppmann.



Figure 1. Deufert + Plischke together with Helena Golab, Hanna Sybille Müller, Benjamin Schoppmann, *Reportable Portraits*, 2007, short version on Vimeo, screenshot by Iris Julian.

Its basic rules consist in one of the performers starting to invent a short movement or sequence of dance, then writing down the basic patterns and passing the notation to the next performer, who repeats it with their body before adding their own movement. Resulting from this, an exchange of physical and mental ideas develops throughout the group. Here we find a realisation of what Schoolman would call a “reconciliation image” (Schoolman 2020, 1): The identity and difference of each movement idea as conceptualised by each participant develop endless forms in an in-between. Thus, the handwriting and signature of one choreographer merge into a polyphony that enables all the voices to be heard. In doing so, a democratic texture is formed: instead of one person’s taste and imagination, each participant’s taste circulates freely throughout the group.

## Research Becoming an Epistemological Question

At this point, I want to return to questions raised at the beginning of this article: How to perceive these alternative modes of working together? What would be excluded when read according to a binary model? Since projects such as *Reportable Portraits* (2007) were not conceptualised by a whole group but by initiators, a dual mode dividing those who conceptualise creatively and those who just repeat mindlessly is still applied when discussed in the discourse of theatre and dance studies. As theatre scholar Kai van Eikels notes, we can trace a dividing line back through the centuries to Ancient Greek philosophy in this respect. From there, we have inherited the following two categories: the creative, inventive *archein* (ἄρχειν) was differentiated from what was called *prattein* (πράττειν), which was understood rather in the sense of mindless execution of pre-ordained forms (van Eikels 2015, 31–47). Alternatively—in the context of my research—interactions unfolding between all the participants were taken into account. When doing this, what emerges is a vast range of questions that points to the field of epistemology. Indeed, the analysis of work processes in my recent study (Julian, forthcoming, autumn 2021) started by questioning research methods.

## The Ontology of *Being-With*

Choreographic formats that enabled creative processes based on a singular plural, such as *Reformulieren*, have recently been discussed by theatre scholars against the background of a *being-with* as conceptualised by the French philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy (Tatari 2017; Ruhsam 2011). Although this

ontological principle is relatively complex, its success in the dance field may be ascribed to two facts: firstly, it can be squeezed into a few phrases (making it vulnerable for misinterpretation, however), and secondly, it makes it possible to analyse permeations between humans and non-humans on various levels.

Nancy's critique points to the fact that a singular still underlies most ontological conceptions (Nancy 2000). Against and in opposition to this philosophical tradition, he conceptualises a singular as a plural in a radical way: not only is the preposition "with" to be foregrounded, but it is to be perceived in the same breath as "being", resulting in a *being-with*. As Nancy states, we are spoken by a certain language before we even speak a language. We receive a name before we can utter our first sound: a "we" is present before an "I" can actively enter into the field of signifiers of a specific culture.

If we analyse the choreographic method of *Reformulieren* in direct conjunction with this ontological principle, let us stay by the example of language. First, every movement is a proposal that is perceived, repeated, and given a physical response. This makes a "before" important, a before that could be traced throughout the group until the first person of the chain – can they be perceived as being the "original"? Then, against the backdrop of *being-with*, it becomes evident that they do not create from an *origo ex nihilo* but come from a specific education, which in itself points to infinity.

Thus, what comes to the fore is its specific unfolding of infinity, an infinity of possible movements becoming concrete (or not) in the moment of realisation throughout the group. Here we begin to touch on the notion of an in-between of identity and difference, as discussed by Schoolman. In the context of the *Reformulieren*, these two aspects do not fuse or merge into one, nor do they form an identitarian whole. Still, a scale of differences of movement, ideas, and responses is realised side by side.

## A Close-Up on Real Life

The *being-with*, an ontological figure of thought, highlights the infinite variations inherent in every action and sensory experience. At the same time, it tends to create an illusion of a merely harmonious whole within a group when seen as disinterested subjects co-working on an equal footing. But what about social reality? Although *Reformulieren* is undoubtedly an outstanding format that succeeds in flattening hierarchies, two initiators invented it, namely Deufert + Plischke.

What real-life structures and possibilities did the choreographers and dancers who took part in the *Reformulieren* find? Considering questions like these, we reach a point where the ontological approach had to be combined with further perspectives. In the context of my study, I, therefore, adapted scientific methods as applied in sociology. Especially the theory of practice as conceptualised by the French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu (Bourdieu 1982) proved to be adaptable to structures and working conditions of the dance and performance field.

In the context of this article, I would like to mention just a few results of the sociological perspective. First, it became evident that dancers and choreographers in the projects that I scrutinised had an equal social background. They mainly studied dance at U.S., South American, and European universities, such as P.A.R.T.S. in Brussels, Movement Research at the former Judson Church in New York, and the Universidad de Chile in Santiago de Chile, just a few. This insight proved to be relevant: since the positions of all the choreographers, dancers, and co-choreographers were based on a homogeneous field, dancers participating in these experimental formats could take the role of the initiators in a subsequent project. This means that there were no fixed power structures, but the field proved to be open and transparent.

A further result made clear that a change of positions does not happen overnight. Still, initiators already have a perennial carrier, and thus, working experiences before theatre houses gave them funds and contracts. Therefore, with Bourdieu's terminology, we could say that the *symbolic capital*, enabling confidence from festival programmers and curators, was achieved by contracted work over the years.

Seen against the backdrop of *being-with* as conceived by Nancy, at a certain point, the sociological perspective came up against its limits: the focus is on human interactions: non-human interactions, for example, a stage design, do not fit into the grid of investigation – components that proved to be relevant, since co-choreographing a staging process. As Eve-Marie Morin, a Canadian-based philosopher discusses, Nancy's philosophy even goes as far as not necessarily putting humans at the centre of a *being-with*. Instead, singular-plural human and non-human entities are to be perceived as non-hierarchically when developing at a certain moment in time (Morin 2012, 45–46). The principle of *being-with* thus motivated my search for a further perspective that also makes it possible to consider our potential to fuse with a thing-world.

## Non-human or Human Interactions? That is the Question

The methods I applied to analyse the staging processes were each developed in close connection with the analysis of the working structures and artistic methods themselves: when publications accompanying the projects were analysed together with the interviews I conducted with the participants, it became clear that the artistic formats put the emphasis on human interactions. At this point in the research, the concept of the *aesthetic field*, as developed by Arnold Berleant (1970), proved to provide a theory that, although keeping human interactions at the centre, it opens possibilities to analyse a permeation with the surrounding world. Interestingly, envisioning a direct sensible reaction and field that occurs when people and things come together, Berleant comes significantly close to Nancy's ontology, which analyses our *being-with* as permeated by an ongoing sense-making world (Morin 2012, 5).

Following the etymological perspective presented by Berleant, activation of our senses can already be discussed as a phenomenon that points to an aesthetic perspective. As he states, Ancient Greek language knew the term *aisthēsis* (αἴσθησις) meaning "perception by the senses" (Berleant 2017, 9). What is important here is that "aesthetics" has a double meaning, indicating both the mere senses (hearing, feeling, seeing) and a sensual experience. In his discussion, he reflects a refinement of our sensibility as it happens exactly through a sensual experience. My own point here is that a staging process—not "only" serves a certain goal, namely, to create a piece of art moreover, it provides a sensual experience. The here and now of a group of people interacting enables participants to refine their senses. As *Reformulieren* proves: The better the sensitivity of one person, the more he or she will be receptive for the fine tones of the colleagues' proposals or movement patterns. When seen under the question of how we can create an environment enabling refinement of our senses interacting with each other as humans but also with animals, and nature as such to my mind, we arrive at a point where art merges into the field of politics.

### The Aesthetic Field

In principle, Berleant's concept of the *aesthetic field* can be perceived as expansion of what the 18th-century philosopher Immanuel Kant (1790) had envisioned with his concept of disinterestedness (*interesseloses Wohlgefallen*): a situation based on a cognitive model that knows an appreciator (the subject of a situation) and an object of appreciation (for example an artwork, but also in nature, such as a sunset). Thus, Kant develops his concept of disinterest and purity between a beholder with a certain mind-set and an object beheld.

With and against this background, Berleant's concept of the *aesthetic field* underlines that Kant's model is too narrow: as Berleant writes, social psychologists such as Kurt Lewin and J. J. Gibson have proved that the social world consists of vectors of forces between participants and things. These vectors invite participants' behaviours, an invitation quality called "affordance" (Berleant 2017, 11–12). Thus, the aesthetic situation has to be perceived as integrative, consisting of various components that form a whole (Berleant 2017, 11). I would now like to describe Berleant's model based on four main components and then analyse two staging processes.

He puts the appreciator, the person experiencing an aesthetic value, in the first place (here, Berleant seems to be an heir to Kant). The main difference is that Berleant's appreciator is also conceptualised as being in a group of people experiencing a somatic sensation with others.

The second component is dedicated to the focus of this appreciation, such as an artwork or a building. Thus—central to the analysis of a staging process—the role of a costume, a stage design, or urban spaces as co-choreographing the work can be included in the analysis. Furthermore, as Berleant writes, the object may also be immaterial, a mental imagination. In my field of study, this is the level of the choreographic notation.

As the third component, there is the event that brings the object of focus into existence. When referring to the field of dance and performance, it has to be kept in mind that the mere notation—read by a performer—is already an aesthetic situation, but at this stage, it can hardly be grasped from the outside. Here Berleant's concept again comes to life, making it possible to establish that it needs an invitation, e. g. by a theatre house, in order to provide a frame so that even situations on the border of visibility become perceivable.

Finally, the fourth component is a situation that activates the field. In the context of this article, I would propose that this is the level of the theorist discussing a work of art and the sphere where the writer meets the reader, namely you as you read this article (Berleant 2017, 11–12).



## Bringing the *Aesthetic Field* into Artistic Practices

The method of the *aesthetic field* will now be applied in order to analyse two different forms of collaboration. The first project has already been a read thread in this article: the staging process for the theatre piece *Reportable Portraits* (2007) based on *Reformulieren* initiated by Deufert + Plischke. This took place in a rehearsal room and included the continuous meeting of a small number of people.

The first factor in the *aesthetic field* as conceived by Berleant would be the appreciator, in this case not a single person but a group of dancers who were invited to work together as co-choreographers. Aesthetic methods such as *Reformulieren* formed a singular-plural so that all the participants could share their taste and aesthetic sensibility. One of the rules consisted of working in absolute silence, resulting in careful observation of their anticipators to repeat their proposal before weaving the texture with their own ideas. Their awareness was constantly trained through this, leading to an increase in their sensibilities. This was consciously analysed by Katrin Deufert in her dissertation on John Cage, where she wrote that artistic methods unfolding in silence might help to raise the ability to listen to one another (Deufert 2002, 29).

The second component of the *aesthetic field*, the object they all experienced, was the singular-plural of the jointly written notation. The third component was four theatre houses interested in this experiment, thus enabling this outstanding staging process to become perceivable when finished. Finally, the fourth component is formed by you and me as you read my article analysing the question of the kind of relevance this process might have for developing sensing of an "I" in the plural of a "we". Before I answer this question, I will discuss a second project.

Called *Radioballett* (2002) by its initiators, a group of artists called LIGNA., this project was realised at the Hamburger main railway station (*Hauptbahnhof*). Thus, this performative situation was directly located in public space, addressing every passer-by to join in: via a radio broadcast by the Freie Radiosender FSK, choreographic notations could be received by mobile phones. Thus, the medium chosen was understood as the message, namely as an invitation to all passers-by (see Figure 2).

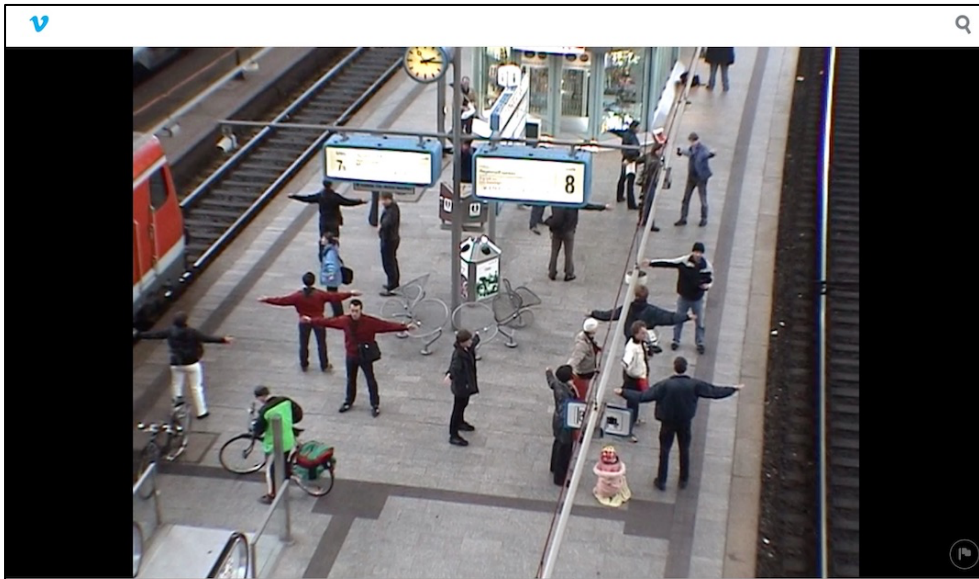


Figure 2. Ligna, *Radioballett*, documentary 2003, by Maren Grimm, Olaf Sobczak, Christina Witz, the version on Vimeo, screenshot by Iris Julian.

Analysing the first level of analysis, the main difference from *Reportable Portraits* becomes clear: the group of people experiencing an aesthetic value was open to an infinite human *being-with*. People from all social contexts joined in, no matter their education, knowledge, or social status. Even deaf people or people who did not understand the language could connect by coping movements as performed by the surrounding people.

Another major difference appears when seen through the lense of the second aspect, namely the focus of appreciation: there we find—by imagining ourselves from the performer’s perspective—a shifting of attention from the radio voice to urban space, namely the Hamburg railway station, and back again to one’s own body. I find it interesting here that the *aesthetic field* emphasises the relevant aspects, namely the place of realisation and its implicit meanings as a public site. Indeed, this project was intended to criticise the privatisations of commonwealth affecting and transforming public spaces. The focus was on changing rules that occur as privatisations evolve, e. g., the exclusion of socially marginalised groups, such as poor and unemployed people, who were forbidden to use the benches in Hamburg’s main railway station (van Eikels 2013, 198–207).

Regarding the third factor, in comparison to *Reportable Portraits*, it becomes clear that instead of money funding or the invitation by theatre houses, the people themselves who joined in this formation brought the object of focus into existence—the critique and the choreographic notation resulting from it. They all met just once: the piece itself “survived” in form of a video recording still available on

platforms such as Youtube. Although its synchronicity excludes the possibility of training a refinement of the senses over a certain period of time, nevertheless the here and now that unfolds in an environment of a public urban space provides an experience of sensing oneself in a plural of the group and in connection with an architecture conveying meaning. Thus my proposal here is that the project can be seen as forming a grass-roots-choreography. In the fourth component, we are again thinking about how these singular-plural artistic practices can be perceived.

## Conclusion

The analysis based on the method of an *aesthetic field* revealed that singular plurals in choreography could develop on various levels. The participants' senses may be affected differently: as the discussion has shown, *Reportable Portraits* consists of a small group of five people. They were working together for a while in the context of a funded project enabling ongoing rehearsals where infinite ideas could flow freely. Resulting from this working structure, their senses are developed in another way compared to the second project. *Radioballett* involved a huge amount of people, a group infinite in itself, that seems to have, at least at the very first sight, nothing in common, but the mere ontological ability to act- interact, exchange. This sensible experience may, as Berleant proposes, be perceived as an aesthetic phenomenon.

However, what both artistic projects have in common is their potential to build an aesthetic refinement, making it possible to foster the ability for grass-roots democracies. The point I want to make here is that neither project aims at a fusion to an all-in-one, a singular and identitarian form (what comes to my mind are the "Tiller Girls" as discussed by sociologist Siegfried Kracauer), but instead form a sphere where identity and difference are constantly present, transmitted and exchanged: the difference in taste resulting in a different style and form of movements as in *Reformulieren*, the differences of passers-by as in *Radioballett*. Although combined by a method or a choreography, the aim was not to erase differences. Instead, a context was built where they could flourish side by side. Following Schoolman, through its proliferation of aesthetic forms, art becomes the precondition of morality by teaching reason the possibility of reconciling identity and difference (Schoolman 2020, 25). And indeed, in the field of choreography, mere imitation could already be the starting point for practising democracy.

## Author Biography

Iris Julian (Gütler) works as a theoretician and an artist at the interface of cultural studies, performance arts, and choreography (both in practice and theory). In 2019 she became an associate scientific member of the research group Mediale Teilhabe with its headquarters at the University of Konstanz, in cooperation with the Leuphana Universität Lüneburg, Zurich University of the Arts, and University of Hamburg. For her PhD, supervised by Prof. Dr. Sabeth Buchmann and Prof. Dr. Ruth Sonderegger and to be published in autumn 2021, she received grants from the Academy of Fine Arts Vienna (2020) and the Wissenschaftsförderung der Stadt Wien Kultur, MA7 (in 2019 and 2020). She has worked as an assistant to the artistic direction and dramaturge of the Tanzquartier Wien. As an artist, she received grants from the Impulstanz: Vienna International Dance Festival and the Federal Ministry of the Republic of Austria: Arts and Culture. Her performative works have been shown, e.g., at MuMoK: Museum of Modern Art, Vienna" (2010) and at the Austrian Cultural Forum London (2017). In addition, she has developed performances for the KUBUS VALIE EXPORT and the BarRectum designed by the Atelier Van Lieshout, during recent years she has collaborated with the visual artist Esther Stocker.

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