

Joanna Szymajda

Institute of Art, Polish Academy of Sciences (PL)

ORCID: 0000-0001-8491-7737

Bodies Dancing towards Freedom

The presented subject block is the outcome of the international conference “The Right to/of Dance: Aesthetic, Cultural, and Political Contexts,” which took place in Warsaw on October 12, 2022. It was co-organized by the Institute of Art of the Polish Academy of Sciences together with the Body/Mind Foundation and accompanied the twenty-first edition of the International Body/Mind Festival. A connection between the academic and artistic worlds resulted, among other things, in a diverse nature of presentations: in addition to academic papers, performative forms of expression were also presented.¹ Shortly beforehand, on February 24, 2022, Russia had begun a full-scale invasion of Ukraine, giving all

¹ For the full conference program and bios of participants and attendees, see <https://cialoumysl.pl/en/wydarzenie/an-international-scientific-conference-the-right-to-dance-aesthetic-cultural-and-political-contexts//>, accessed February 18, 2024.

cultural initiatives in Poland a very particular context. Thus, both the festival's artistic program and the conference not to lack topics related to Ukrainian culture and its representatives, though the assumed field of topics and thought extended far beyond Ukraine's state of national emergency. Both forms of the events allowed for wide-ranging reflections on concepts of constitutional freedom and rights, manifested in individual and public as well as artistic spheres. The essay cluster published in this issue of *Pamiętnik Teatralny* features selected papers in an expanded version. The remaining presentations and a recording of the entire conference will soon be available in the form of video recordings on the Institute of Art of the Polish Academy of Sciences digital repository website.

All presented texts are tied by a reflection on the notion of the right to dance, examined in relation to socio-cultural frameworks and restrictions and the legal norms that are imposed on the practice of dance, and more broadly, corporal expression, as well as the status of the artist. The need to unlatch these norms and limitations is particularly evident in liminal moments and states of exception—and it is in these contexts that the authors base their articles. The texts by Małgorzata Leyko and Anton Ovchinnikov address the situation of male and female dance artists during the war, that is, under conditions of oppression or persecution, or confronted with having to make difficult moral choices. In the next two articles, by Maria Claudia Alves Guimarães and Agnieszka Sosnowska respectively, dance, which in Brazilian society has become a tool for the emancipation of excluded groups, is analyzed as a fundamental civil right. In Wojciech Klimczyk's concluding article, mental illness, a state of emergency that provokes questions about the limits of methodology and the rights of the researcher in relation to the object of study, constitutes a contribution on the artist's right to self-determination.

In the Polish-language literature on the subject, the concept of rights in the context of the practice of choreography and dance has so far been analyzed synthetically only on the grounds of copyright law,² though elements of such deliberations can also be found in various unrelated theoretical texts or reviews. Therefore, the presented block is a pioneering attempt at taking a cross-sectional look at the relationship of the concept of right—in its narrow, legislative sense, but also in its broader cultural, moral sense—in relation to choreography and dance on various levels, also encouraging further research. The publication is

² Krzysztof Felchner, *Choreografia i pantomima w świetle prawa autorskiego* (Warszawa: Wolters Kluwer, 2012); Joanna Szymajda, "Prawo autorskie w tańcu," in *Słownik tańca współczesnego*, ed. Małgorzata Leyko and Joanna Szymajda (Łódź: Wydawnictwo Uniwersytetu Łódzkiego, 2022), 516–517.

a valuable addition to thoughts on aspects of the politicality of choreography, which have already been analyzed many times by Polish researchers and academics.³

Another term common to the collected articles is “geopolitical choreography,” suggested by Anton Ovchinnikov. This phrase highlights the multi-level involvement of dance in geopolitical relations, translating directly into who, how, where, and on what terms dance can be practiced. Ovchinnikov’s text takes on a direct account approach in a testimony to the experience of war in Ukraine, presented from the perspective of a contemporary dance artist, captured almost in *statu nascendi*. The author analyzes the ethical circumstances of the Ukrainian dance community’s attitudes and actions, as well as the forms of ad hoc artistic and documentary narratives it conducts, and asks questions about artistic responsibility, the relevance of which is resounding ever more loudly in the face of the continuing conflict.⁴ Ovchinnikov’s statement is preceded by an introduction, recounting historical examples of reactions and attitudes toward war adopted by dance artists throughout the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, as well as discussing the non-artistic functions of dance, which in a state of emergency can be a form of resistance or an element of military strategy.

The fate of Polish female dancers of Jewish descent—bearers of the memory of war crimes, of which they were both victims and witnesses—is recalled by Małgorzata Leyko. The subject of her research is the biographies of a dozen female artists active on Polish stages before 1939. The author describes the cases of well-known choreographers and dancers, such as Irena Prusicka, Stefania Grodzieńska, Nata Lerska, and, thanks to the pioneering archival research, a number of nearly forgotten dancers’ names which she brings back into our cultural memory. Leyko analyzes the survival strategies that female artists developed both in the ghettos and while hiding on the “Aryan” side. The article also cites contextual legislative threads, i.e., the regulations of Nazi Germany, including the Law for the Restoration of the Professional Civil Service (*Gesetz zur Wiederherstellung des Berufsbeamtentum*). Introduced in April 1933, the act targeted all “enemies” of the Third Reich, who were to be dismissed from their jobs on its basis. The process was overseen by the Reich Chamber of Culture (*Reichskulturkammer*), to which the entire dance community was subject. The

³ Marta Keil, ed., *Choreografia: Polityczność* (Poznań: Art Stations Foundation, 2018); Paweł Mościcki, “Choreografia politycznego wrzenia,” *Didaskalia*, no. 133/134 (2016): 51–56.

⁴ For what the overall cultural situation in Ukraine looks like two years after the outbreak of the war, see Bogna Stefańska, “Sztuka na czas wojny,” *Dwutygodnik.com*, no. 380 (2024), <https://www.dwutygodnik.com/artukul/11136-sztuka-na-czas-wojny.html>; Zoja Zvyntsiakivska, “Drogocenny bilet,” *Dwutygodnik.com*, no. 380 (2024), <https://www.dwutygodnik.com/artukul/11139-drogocenny-bilet.html>.

author recalls that purges and immediate dismissals of male and female dancers of Jewish descent began in many cultural institutions on their own initiative, even before the Chamber became active. Other levels on which the researcher considers the restrictions regarding the right to dance are the cultural and social ones. Leyko emphasizes that dance not only became a sphere of refuge from the experiences of war for the artists described, but more broadly was a way of expressing their own modern identity. By manifesting their subjectivity, they broke the taboo that surrounded the female “Jewish body” and went beyond the traditional roles assigned to them. The position of the female artists was part of the so-called *frojen frage*—the women question, being a manifestation of broader modernization processes.

The emancipatory potential of dance as a socio-artistic practice is also analyzed by Maria Claudia Alves Guimarães and Agnieszka Sosnowska. Guimarães presents an overview of the development of contemporary dance in Brazil over the past decades, with a special focus on the growing participation of Afro-Brazilian dancers and dancers from the lower social classes, who are outpacing the previously dominant white artists from the middle classes. Guimarães links these emancipatory processes to the legislative changes of the 1990s, which had the indirect aim of reducing the level of urban violence. Leading the narrative from a postcolonial perspective, through the conceptual dichotomy of center–periphery, the author cites examples of original initiatives at the intersection of activism and artistic practice. The perspective of geopolitical choreography allows us to see that the professional practice of dance enables a symbolic exodus from the favelas and constitutes real social advancement.

Hélio Oiticica was one of the first artists of the 1960s to attempt to challenge social hierarchies and how they manifest themselves in the Brazilian art world through his avant-garde performance actions. Agnieszka Sosnowska analyzes the links between the artist and favela residents, highlighting his role in recognizing the emancipatory nature of samba. Oiticica ceded his a priori right to practice art, as a white representative of the middle class, to favela residents when he invited them to dance together in 1965 for the inauguration of his *Parangolés* work series. However, the performers from the favelas were not allowed into the museum, which, according to the author, testified to the deep divisions in Brazilian society and the political hypocrisy of the middle class, but the performance nevertheless took place in front of the institution’s entrance and, through samba, actually became a manifestation of freedom. The right to dance, transcending the hierarchies inherent to the geography and social fabric of the city, emerges in this context to be the same as a civil right. The author analyzes in detail the

mechanisms through which Afro-Brazilian dance became for Oiticica a medium for the transformation of both art and social life.

In Oiticica's case, involvement in local Afro-Brazilian culture was connected with his fascination with Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophy of life, especially its Dionysian aspects. Sosnowska, after Paula Braga, cites the thesis that the artist's path in a sense coincides with that of Zarathustra. This brings us closer to Vaclav Nijinsky, as it is in the context of his biography that similar Nietzschean themes are brought up by Wojciech Klimczyk. Based on the texts of the two famous "artists of madness," that is, Nietzsche's *Ecce Homo* and Vaclav Nijinsky's *Diary*, in particular the analysis of the descriptions of Alpine walks contained in them, the author examines the universal human right to "wander (off)." Klimczyk, in an innovative way, on the grounds of Polish dance theory, combines kinesiology with philosophical and sociological reflections on the discourse of the madman, well-established in art theory, and cultural conditions of the "transformative movement event," which is the departure of Nietzsche and Nijinsky to "the other side of rationality." The author focuses on the "plasticity" of walking—borrowing the concept of plasticity from philosopher Catherine Malabou—that is, the kind of walking that transforms the walking subject, radically changing its existential, and therefore political status.

This selection of articles on different historical moments and geographical regions, written from diverse research perspectives, invites the reader to apply at least two key approaches: that of biography and that of geopolitical choreography. This essay cluster demonstrates the potential of the art world in borderline situations, and how it encourages reflection. It is also a valuable contribution to the Polish-language literature on dance theory and history, and an invitation to further research.

Translated by Maciej Mahler

