

TOWARDS NEW HORIZONS

The biennial conference, “Matters of Engagement” is about the relationship between dance and politics and above all about the shifts in social and institutional frameworks. A conference is usually programmed as part of the Dance Education Biennial but the choice of theme and configuration is up to the host organisation.

In the following interview, curator Florian Malzacher, Nik Haffner, artistic director of the HZT and artistic associate Britta Wirthmüller explain why and in which ways they have reconfigured the format for 2018.

Interview: Elena Philipp

For this biennial conference, yourselves and the participating students will examine the relationship between art and politics, dancers and society. What made you choose this topic?

Britta Wirthmüller (BW): We wanted to choose a topic that is relevant to the HZT and we are really engaged with. A topic we also have questions about ourselves but which isn't so specific that it only works for the HZT and one which could potentially occupy all students and teachers and towards which all educational institutions have a position. The starting point was what links the things we do in our institutions every day with what goes on in the world around us?

The conference is not structured as a series of talks but as an excursion with space for reflection. What was the reason for this unusual format?

Nik Haffner (NH): We found it more exciting to demonstrate possibilities for action and making suggestions rather than producing knowledge and hope that the students could take and use these as soon as they join companies after their studies or work as independent artists. A conference can all too easily become academic, eluding the interests and needs of most students. We did not want the conference to just be a prestige event for the HZT, for which we invited lots of external people. It is directed towards the group of students and teachers taking part in the educational biennial.

BW: The shared experience is important to us. This plays a big part in dance, whether in dance classes, rehearsals or workshops. At academic conferences there is a coming and going, the participants say to themselves ‘I'll come back when the big names are speaking’. At “Matters of Engagement”, we'll stay as a group from 11 in the morning till 9 at night.

Florian Malzacher (FM): In recent years, the view of political art has changed somewhat. It now plays a major role in biennials such as at Venice and the last *documenta*. On the other hand, a stronger resistance is forming that is asking whether or not this is art at all – as can also be seen in the discussions around *documenta*. At this conference however, we are more interested in which forms of artistic activity engage with real political events and above all, which concrete groups and initiatives have been established here in Berlin. And this raises the question of what can be negotiated in what way, what one is allowed to do artistically – for example in relation to politics of identity and postcolonial problems.

The opening talk of the conference is a performance. In “Situation with Doppengänger”, Oliver Zahn and Julian Warner deal with postcolonial appropriation in dance – which movement material can I use? Do I have a right as a white person or not? These questions occupy and also unsettle many artists at the moment – one is suddenly questioned in a certain way or even attacked for something one hadn’t thought of before.

When I show students older performances on video, I sometimes notice very clearly that our perceptions have changed. Some things (hopefully) wouldn’t be made in that way again and other things should simply not be done any more. Of course there is a fine line between this and self censorship. Questions such as these effect students very much at the moment – they should be more informed about them. On the other hand it is often the younger generation that knows about these issues already and it is the older ones who still need to be sensitised towards them.

How does the conference programme concretely reflect these changes?

FM: Very real initiatives form the focus of the conference. You could say that they are examples of best practice that will be questioned. In this way a whole spectrum of artistic/political practices will be outlined, from postcolonial studies to gentrification to migration to artistic activism. The idea is to use Berlin as the biennial’s location – and through ten excursions, to involve a range of speakers which wouldn’t be possible in a normal conference. It is a sort of curated walk through the city visiting different initiatives founded by or at least involving artists: the *Neue Nachbarschaft Moabit (Moabit New Neighbourhood)* initiated by Marina Naprushkina or the **foundationClass* at the Weißensee Academy of Art Berlin established by Ulf Aminde, the artist activists of the *Peng! Collective* or the *Zentrum für Politische Schönheit (Center for Political Beauty)* as well as locations for artistic exchange such as *Savvy Contemporary* or groups in Kreuzberg who fight gentrification in and around Kottbusser Tor.

Using these examples as a starting point, we identify three types of action: the repeated action (Re-enacting), acting in the present (Acting) and anticipatory action (Pre-enacting). The political scientist Oliver Marchart who recently published a book about pre-enacting, addresses how art anticipates political gestures or events in his talk. One of his central examples is the work of the Israeli group *Public Movement* who will also take part in the conference.

It’s actually also about choreographic questions of course, such as the one posed by Judith Butler during her speech at Occupy Wall Street: What does it mean when living bodies come together? How does a movement form from a collective body? There are links between dance and politics of course but sometimes you do not even see what tools and what knowledge you might have, or you don’t know how to use it. As a snapshot of social relationships, the conference could perhaps address that.

Britta and Nik, what is the urgency of this approach for you?

BW: This certainly has an urgency in relation to dance and dance education for me. It was not that easy to find examples in dance that respond to real political situations. I find that symptomatic. In dance education as I see it and have experienced myself, there is still a very strong emphasis on the self – even if this has changed somewhat – and on your own body: How well do I conform to a certain standard? In technical training especially the

idealised image of a dancer is still very strongly defined. The teachers' assessments count a lot and I see that students are little motivated to ask themselves what sort of dancer they want to be. It would be important to always ask at such moments, when do I dare to disagree? When do I dare to ask, "OK, I could do that, but can you tell me why I should?" The structures are quite patronising. In this environment, at least as I see it, students shy away from questions of political consciousness and rather say, 'politics doesn't have anything to do with me'. In this way, from my perspective, every dance class actually raises fundamental political and social questions.

NH: Yes, the political has small beginnings: How do I participate in things as a student, how do I behave in everyday situations? At the biennial, for example, we offer a workshop in which a mentor is available but there is no 'teacher'. We trust the students – they bring plenty with them to shape an exciting week. The dance training conference was immediately open to this idea too, there is a great willingness to try something new.

It sounds as if a paradigm shift is necessary in dance education – or perhaps it is already in progress?

NK: Yes, it's already begun. In many training courses it's almost unavoidable to focus very much and to sort of put on blinkers. But we have a duty as teachers, the students are usually very young and, in all sectors, international. Are we really able to say, in a political situation such as today's, that we don't have time to deal with such fundamental questions, because we've got to prepare for the next contest? The biennial offers an opportunity for us all to pause once more. Ideally, it will be an experience that moves something in the participants and that will come up again later and that they can use. That's why we have purposely broadened our horizons. We haven't just invited our partner universities with whom we already have affiliations through our exchange programme or whose training systems resemble ours, but we have also invited three guests from whom I hope we can learn a lot: Karima Mansour from the Cairo Contemporary Dance Center, Mohamad Abbasi from the Invisible Center of Contemporary Dance in Tehran and Alesandra Seutin from the École de Sables in Senegal. They all work under completely different conditions to us, not only financially but in terms of space – what does it mean in a country like Iran to dance at all?

BW: Ideally it will reflect how dance education has functioned for us for decades. For me it is also about sensitising the students to what could be 'political' for them. There should be certain things that are just not acceptable any more in training, which five or ten years ago were seen as totally matter of course. In my opinion, that is, or would be, an important challenge.