English Edition
DORIS UHLICH
THE FUTURE IS NAKED

I body you, you body me. (Doris Uhlich)

Over the past two decades, Doris Uhlich has made a significant contribution to contemporary dance. Her choreographies are marked by a commitment to diversity while radically challenging conventional notions of the body. She works with people from a range of social backgrounds and with diverse biographies and physical characteristics, explores how classical ballet might be translated into contemporary contexts, reveals the potential of nakedness beyond mere eroticisation and provocation, and dissolves established boundaries between human, animal, machine and organism. Uhlich's work spans conceptual performance, utopian landscapes of the body and sensual-somatic excess.

The Future is Naked brings together voices from those who have accompanied her on her artistic journey, as well as scholars, journalists and collaborators, offering the first comprehensive insight into Doris Uhlich's choreographic universe.

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Doris Uhlich (b. 1977 in Upper Austria) is an internationally acclaimed dancer, performer and choreographer. She has received numerous prizes and awards, including the 2024 Austrian Art Prize for Performing Arts.

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DORIS UHLICH

THE FUTURE IS NAKED

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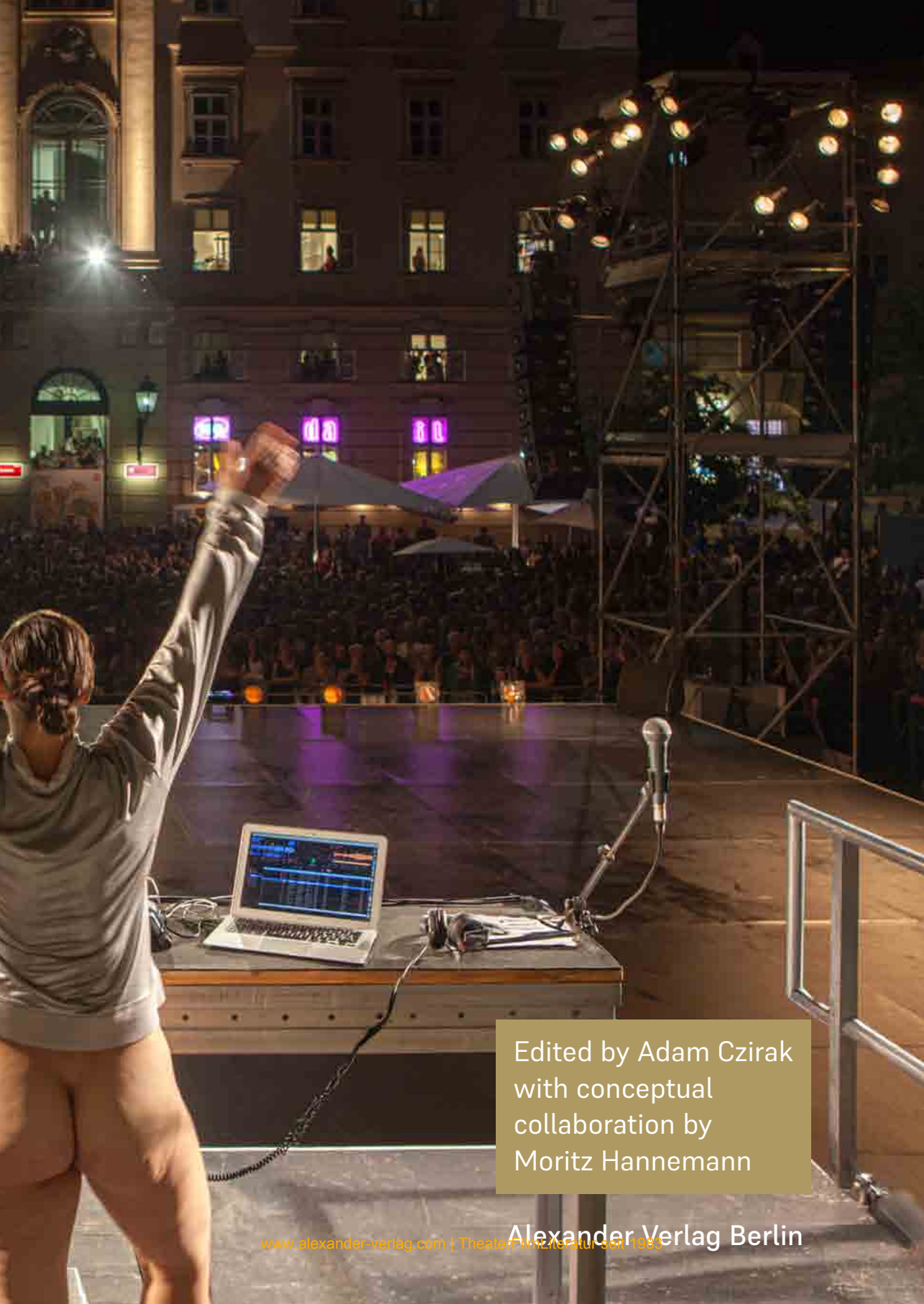

Edited by Adam Czirak with conceptual collaboration by Moritz Hannemann

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THE FUTURE IS NAKED«

Adam Czirak // 12 / 13

The future is naked. This statement by Doris Uhlich can first and foremost be understood as a comment on her emblematic choreographies featuring naked bodies, in which performers leave behind not only their clothes but also suspend conventions of representation and normative ideas of the body. Yet the phrase can also be read as a perspective on a future that is, on the one hand, still unwritten, while already carrying within it the consequences of the present. In this sense, *the future is naked* may be understood as a diagnosis of a moment in which vulnerability and precarity have become part of our everyday experience and threaten to expand on a global scale. Nakedness can signify both emancipation and empowerment, as well as vulnerability and powerlessness; protest as much as exposure. It is between these poles that Uhlich's choreographies unfold. Rather than idealising or aestheticising nakedness, they seek to initiate a reflection on, and a reassessment of, its complex social meanings.

This publication marks the twentieth anniversary of Uhlich's work as a choreographer and is dedicated to the richness and diversity of her artistic practice. Born in 1977 in Vöcklabruck, Upper Austria, Uhlich studied contemporary dance pedagogy at the Conservatory of the City of Vienna and worked as a performer with theatercombinat between 2002 and 2009. Since 2006, she has been creating her own works, which have gained international recognition. These range from solo pieces to ensemble productions, the latter involving up to 120 performers. In some projects, Uhlich performs her own choreographies; in others, she collaborates with professional and/or non-professional performers, continually moving between the perspectives of choreographer and performer. Alongside the varying durations of the pieces – which can range from three minutes to several hours, with future projects envisioned as durational performances extending over multiple days – Uhlich's spatial arrangements are equally diverse. Some works employ a conventional proscenium-style arrangement, while others create open spaces of encounter. They take place in conventional theatrical settings or as interventions in art institutions and in public spaces. Uhlich also develops site-specific performances realised

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in highly particular locations, including shopping malls, ski-jumping hills, baroque gardens, private apartments, techno clubs and museums. Many of these works exist in multiple versions and are continually transformed and adapted in response to their performance contexts, evolving through the recombination of their modules and constituent elements into ever-new configurations.

Uhlich's choreographies are marked by a commitment to diversity and a radical questioning of conventional representations of the body, as well as of normative modes of thought and action. This agenda manifests itself, among other ways, in her integration of nakedness, ageing, dis/ability and pressing social issues – indeed, social challenges – into dance and performance. Uhlich is known for working with performers and dancers of widely differing biographies, bodies, abilities, ages and genders, as well as with both professionals and non-professionals. Her works engage with political issues in deeply personal ways. Collaborations with intergenerational ensembles and with marginalised groups, whom she seeks to move from the periphery into the spotlight, are a cornerstone of her artistic practice. Her distinctive artistic style is shaped by a nonconformist approach and strong ethical and political awareness. As a result, her choreographies frequently spark debates about bodily diversity while offering important impulses for contemporary dance and beyond. Through her productions, Uhlich challenges established formats and prevailing images of the body. She works, for example, with people whose bodies bear different physical inscriptions; she interrogates classical ballet with regard to its translatability into contemporary contexts; she explores the potential of nakedness beyond simple eroticisation and provocation; she reflects on the future of the human body in an age of surgical and genetic enhancement; and she dissolves established boundaries between human, animal, machine and organism. The spectrum of Uhlich's work ranges from conceptual performances and utopian bodily landscapes to sensorial-somatic excesses.

Another defining feature of Uhlich's work is its sustained interest in movement: movement as bodily expression, as choreographic research, and as a social, societal and political dynamic. What moves the body, and what causes it to move? When and how is it set in motion? What shakes it awake? What slows it down, immobilises it, unsettles it, or causes it to disintegrate? Uhlich's attempts to choreographically trace hidden and (seemingly) self-evident movements, as well as the motivations that drive them, form a foundation of her artistic engagement with both human and non-human bodies.

In 2014, she met the media artist and DJ Boris Kopeinig, with whom she has collaborated ever since and who, since 2018, has also contributed conceptually to the development of many of her works. Whether working independently or together with Boris Kopeinig, Uhlich continuously shares her artistic practice with people both with and without dance experience. For her, the work does not end with the performance itself. Equally important is finding ways to open up and translate her choreographic ideas for audiences who are eager to move and engage physically with the material.

To create a space in which the many facets of Uhlich's oeuvre can resonate, this volume brings together contributions from colleagues, scholars, journalists and artistic collaborators who have accompanied her work over the years. Through poetic, anecdotal and analytical texts, they approach her practice from a variety of perspectives. Their voices enter into a dialogue

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with Uhlich's choreographic, performative and pedagogical work: they introduce individual pieces, reflect on them, recount experiences from productions and workshops, and offer insights into the wide range of themes, concerns and creative processes that shape her artistic practice.

The book opens with a manifesto-like introduction by Doris Uhlich. In it, she not only questions traditional norms of dance and choreography, but also develops a personal, vivid, and at times almost physical language for describing the body as flesh, as a social construct, as a site where history and biography are inscribed, as an energetic field, and as a space of encounter on and beyond the stage. Written in the first person, the essay examines themes of nakedness, (im)perfection and inclusion, while inviting readers to understand her perspective on the body beyond the realm of artistic practice.

The book then proceeds chronologically through twenty-nine chapters devoted to Doris Uhlich's most important artistic works, each accompanied by an introduction, photographs and commentary. Interspersed among these project presentations are longer essays by Tina Amerstorfer, Gabriele Brandstetter, Karin Harrasser, Boris Kopeinig, Miriam Kreuser, Helmut Ploebst and Constanze Schellow, each exploring key themes in Uhlich's choreographic practice: her critical engagement with classical ballet; the compositional forms and social dynamics of plurality and touch; the inclusion of non-professional dancers in choreographic work; and her international workshop practice, which can be understood as a form of collective research.

The central challenge of a book about choreography is to do justice to the performative nature of the works while finding a form capable of preserving traces of their ephemerality. The contributors therefore sought, in their commentaries on the individual works, to develop a language that is as vivid and aesthetically resonant as possible, one that allows this volume to be read not only as a "work" in its own right, but also as a transposition of the ephemeral performances into another medium. Perhaps the gaps between fleeting dance and its documentation can even give rise to further reflection and associations. Perhaps the network of essays, commentaries and documents assembled here can itself produce choreographic experiences – experiences that emerge only through reading, browsing and moving unpredictably between chapters, and that remain resistant to definition or anticipation. The future of this book is open. *And the future is naked.*

Adam Czirak
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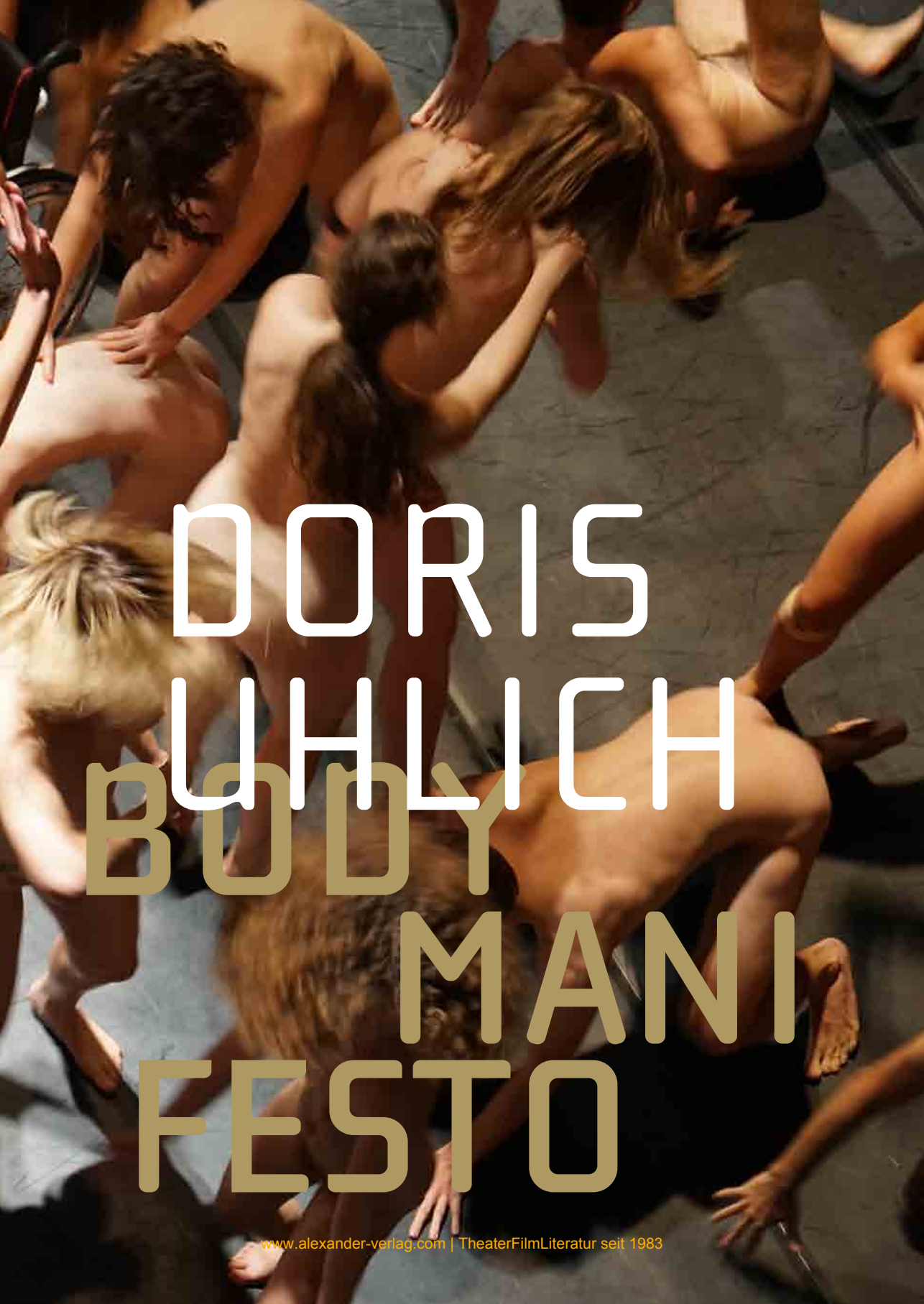

DORIS UHLICH

BODY MANIFESTO

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BODY

I explore the body in its materiality and energy. A human being is a living, ever-changing body archive; the body is a storage system, the skin a permeable texture rather than an impermeable wall. I store my biography in my body, and also the "biography of the world". The vibrations of the present and its political, social, economic and cultural events leave their inscriptions there. *the body is in the world, the world is in the body.* We move through the infinitely complex choreography of our biographies, shaped partly by ourselves and partly by others. I am interested in how the present connects with the past at the point where they intersect in the body. What shapes our thinking, our bodies, their gestures, their very constitution? What do we take in, what do we put out?

The human body is always connected to, in relation with, and in exchange with other bodies and forms of life.

When I shake my body, my flesh, I set those deposits in motion, I shake up my archive, I activate bodily thinking. Embedded in my flesh lies an archive of bodily memory. I shake it up like the feathers inside a duvet; my flesh laughs when it is set into vibration, when it moves, sways, jumps, flies, jiggles.

a body is a brain, boom tschak!
activate the brain, boom tschak!
shaking up the brain, boom tschak!
remix the brain, boom tschak!

When the deposits that have been shaken loose are bound up with painful experiences, it often feels as though I am working, or rather dancing, against the traces of helplessness, anger or surrender.

Fear and anxiety are emotions that take hold of the body, often blocking it, freezing it and leading to a tendency to withdraw. I search for ways for bodies to remain mobile, even when the present inscribes itself in them in a way that makes them rigid.

I understand the present as a moving body – something that can be shaped and transformed.

The body is the pivotal point through which I connect with the world. It is not a static entity but a living organism in which layers of history lie dormant. Our own bodies, too, harbour aspects that are alien to us; from time to time, I feel like a stranger to myself. I believe that when you discover the unusual, the unclassifiable within yourself and do not push it away, you also encounter the unfamiliar beyond yourself in a more nuanced way. Once you become aware that otherness is at home within you, the unfamiliar beyond the body becomes more accessible, and you can engage more sensitively with people, things and forms of existence you do not know, drawing closer to them.

A collective body is an assemblage, a group that merges into an organism whose members mutually influence each other. When bodies touch and create rhizomatic systems, I see them as analogue networks that transmit and circulate sweat, energy,

breath and emotions instead of digital data.

There is often a one-dimensional way of looking at bodies – our own and those of others. Body shaming and exclusion still persist when someone falls outside the norm. That is what I dance against. We cannot leave our bodies behind. We can alter them, optimize them to our liking through surgical procedures, body enhancements, and other interventions; we can extend them. But the body remains a home we cannot leave.

The world is made up of many bodies, and I want to see that multiplicity of bodies on stage.

DANCE

I began dancing when I was eleven; you could say that I fell in love with dance at the age of eleven. Through dancing, I discovered a Doris and a range of feelings I had never known before. I stuck with it because I became "addicted" to dance. Sometimes I wonder how my relationship to dance has changed over the years through my choreographic practice. My artistic work has made the relationship to dance more complex, but I have never forgotten its transformative power.

My first encounter with dance came through films such as *Dirty Dancing* and *Flashdance*. In the living room, I would perform the film choreographies for my grandmother, pushing cabinets aside, rearranging tables, stacking chairs on top of one another to make space. I still vividly remember the moment I told my piano teacher at the time that I wanted to learn to dance. Her response was: "What? You, with your figure?" It hurt me. I cried, and I could not understand why dance should be reserved for thin people. Even so, I went to dance classes. Already then, I realised that I would have to contend with prejudice. At nineteen, after finishing secondary school, I wanted to study contemporary dance pedagogy at the Conservatory in Vienna. The first time I auditioned, I was rejected: I was told I was too fat and too young. Within a year, I lost twenty kilograms, trained intensively, auditioned again, and was accepted. Yet, slim as I was, I did not feel like the dancing Doris I wanted to be. So I gained weight again. They could not throw me out; I could do everything the thin dancers could do. I became less and less concerned with how my body looked and more with how it felt, with how much I enjoyed living in it. I wanted a stronger bodily home again. I learned to love abundance.

Everyone can dance. Dance should not be governed by normative rules, regulations or dogmas, nor should it require bodies to conform to prescribed ideals.

Every body can undertake an archaeology of energy and has its own specific ways of releasing energy . When "body pleasure" is articulated through personal movements, through "energy dance steps", I call these movements "Energetic Icons". In interaction with electronic music, the desire to move grows, and that desire is shaped

into dance movement. Through repetition, the movement becomes more precise. One moves further and further into a particular movement, intensifies it, works with it (in this phase I describe myself as a "dance worker"), and gradually begins to like it, perhaps even to love it, because it feels good, because the movement itself is empowering. When we love something or someone, we experience a huge energy surge. This individual form of energy dance allows the body to recharge; it becomes a kind of bodily fuel. Energy and form exist in a constant reciprocal relationship. An "Energetic Icon" is alive when, through repetition, energy becomes more important than form, and a new form – a new repeatable movement – emerges out of that energy. Work with "Energetic Icons" can also take place collectively, as people connect through their movement vocabularies and become receptive to inspiration from other bodies. These communal forms of energy dance give rise to contemporary choreographic rituals that come into being and dissolve again as soon as the movement disappears.

In my work with people with physical dis/abilities, we explore the bodily relationships and energetic exchanges that exist between human beings and machines – wheelchairs, crutches or prostheses. Over the course of this research, the performers also incorporate their (disassembled) machines, their wheelchairs and other devices into their "Energetic Icons". These become integrated as extensions of the body or of movement. Almost anything can become a bodily extension, something a person may adopt temporarily or over the long term. Such an extension might be another body with which one connects, or objects in the surrounding space – a bicycle, an umbrella, skis and, of course, new technologies.

Even a small movement can be forceful. Older people and people with physical dis/abilities may sometimes only be able to dance small movements. For them, a small movement is a large movement. It also becomes large for those watching when normative ideas of strength and energy are called into question and unsettled.

Physical limits often contain pain. But they can also contain explosive potential when frustration is transformed into curiosity. Bodily limits can become a springboard for discovering movement. At a limit, friction emerges; usually first as a pause, then as a reorientation. I am interested in the potential that resides in limits when we open ourselves to unexplored physical territory.

In my practice, "Alienated Icons" are movements that feel unfamiliar, unusual, even strange. The process works like this: while dancing, you alter a movement you know well, and the more you find yourself thinking, *What am I actually doing? This is not something I recognise in myself. It feels strange, awkward, odd*, the better. The more that thought arises, the more likely it is that you are expanding your bodily archive. I call this search futurist archaeology. Even as you are excavating, you are already oriented towards a vision of how what is unearthed might be developed further. What is unearthed is not preserved; it is thought further, danced further, moved further.

When all the limbs move in opposing directions, when the arms and legs are denied synchrony, when no movement is repeated and the body remains in a state of continual transformation, then one enters my concept of "Pleasure Chaos". What interests me here is letting go of legibility and breaking free from linearity and repetition.

I am drawn to accidental movements, the ones that emerge when I cannot (yet) perform a movement properly. I look for positions that throw my body into turbulence because I struggle to stabilise them. I lose my balance; a jerk, a tremor, a muscular quiver emerges. Involuntary movements arise, chance movements that challenge conventional ideas of dance and perfection. For me, there is beauty in fragility. Fragility becomes a strength when it generates vitality, when it is not concealed but actively sought out and allowed to become dance. In an unstable position – one that is not abandoned immediately although it is difficult to sustain – elemental forces often reveal themselves.

I am interested in the disintegration of movement, in the search for a dance that approaches stillness: an "immobile dance" animated by the dynamics of motionlessness and of being unable to move forward.

Again and again, I try to expend myself completely, without thinking about the limits of my energy reserves. We are conditioned to ration our energy, to conserve it, to save something for the future. It can be liberating to leave that conditioning behind and throw yourself into movement with all the strength you can give in the present moment. But it only works with movements you genuinely enjoy. Then it becomes a burning without burning out.

Movement has the potential to be seismic. It can spread; the energy of movement can be contagious. You can "body" other people – and also spaces, architecture, materials. *I body you, you body me.*

I am preoccupied by the simple yet complex question of what motivates us to set ourselves in motion. I enjoy watching dancers who are driven by powerful motivations.

As a choreographer, I support others in arriving at a particular quality within a movement. It is a delicate challenge to do this with movements that do not originate in my own body. I try to recognise a movement's emerging vision, to understand it, and to offer impulses through words as it develops. It is like feeling one's way into a movement that is still taking shape, still searching for its own singular logic.

Life is not a solo. Life is an ensemble work.

NAKEDNESS

Nakedness is our first costume.

When I undress and place my hands on my naked body, it feels as though I am coming closer to my bodily archive, as though I can engage with it more directly, knead it, set it vibrating, activate it.

There was a moment when, as a dancer, I found myself asking while dancing: *What is it that is actually dancing there?* So I took off my training clothes, my sports bra, my underwear, and watched my body dance.

Nakedness is a condition that connects us all. Every human being is born naked. We enter the world naked, covered in blood and mucus as we emerge from the womb. Then we are washed, and "the dry age" begins. Over the course of life, many people lose touch with that slimy, wet beginning, with fluidity itself. The sterility of the body seems to become increasingly important; even our technological devices do not take kindly to wetness. I find it inspiring to remind myself, again and again, that the human body develops in amniotic fluid, that human beings are aquatic life forms in a way, emerging from wetness and slime.

There is a difference between "I present myself naked" and "I am Doris, naked, on stage". I do not drape a concept of nudity over the skin. Rather, I search for a naked way of being, for specific movements that only make sense, or are only possible, in a state of nakedness; for emotions that arise while dancing naked. What political engine, what political force, resides in nakedness? Just as nudism in the 1920s, the desire for liberated bodies in the movements of 1968, or the demonstrative use of nakedness by groups such as Femen, I feel that the kind of nakedness that speaks to me is connected to political and social movements, past and present.

I am searching for a form of nakedness that is unselfconscious and free of inhibition, a nakedness that celebrates the body in its materiality – *let's party our body*. This nakedness does not serve the logic of *sex sells*, nor does it reproduce stereotypes of erotic imagery, sexualisation, ideology or provocation. Instead, it stands for beauty in diversity, individuality within collectivity, vitality and the desire to discover and inhabit a deeper sense of embodiment.

What matters to me is how a body moves, not whether it conforms to visual or other normative standards. When searching for dance movements, I am not interested in directing attention towards deficits, but towards possibilities, towards potential. In my fat dance technique, in which my flesh creates waves, I celebrate my body in its soft materiality, generating waves of fat with varying intensities.

It sometimes happens that, when practising fat dance, slender people admire those with fuller bodies because their bodies can create more visible waves. Once, a slim woman said to a voluptuous woman: "I wish I had your bum. It swings so beautifully." Such reversals dissolve rigid beauty ideals – not by wagging a finger and delivering a political lecture against beauty norms, but by allowing people to immerse themselves, through their bodies, in the abundance of possible movements.

There is no such thing as "natural nakedness". We shape and fashion our nakedness – we shape our muscles or we do not, we shave or we do not, tattoo ourselves or we do not, get piercings or we do not,

undergo surgery or we do not, apply anti-cellulite creams or we do not, wear deodorant or perfume or we do not, and so on.

The body has become caught up in the optimisation mania of the capitalist system. I believe that the pursuit of immortality, of anti-aging, can no longer be stopped or reversed. Too many profit-driven industries and promises of happiness are invested in the vision of improving the body according to ideals we have internalised. But it is still possible to dance against this. I believe in the emancipatory power of dance, in emancipation through dance.

SPACE

For me, space, too, is a body – a body of deposits and inscriptions. There is no neutral space.

In the space that surrounds my body, the present, together with its past, sits, stands, flies, rests and pulses. The complex present is my contemporary – my "time-companion", to borrow the literal sense of the German *Zeitgenossin* – inscribing itself both within me and in the space around me. I like to use the principle of "moving in order to set something or someone else in motion" to activate spaces and warm them up, much as one warms up a muscle. I am more creative in a space that has been warmed up.

space is not passive
space is not neutral
space is a body

I like to experience the body as a maker of relationships and a catalyst for reordering, reconfiguration and change, as an epicentre of action and transformation.

I value the development of site-specific performances in expansive locations that are larger and less easily grasped than any theatre stage could ever allow.

It is important to rehearse in spaces of different scales. If only small and medium-sized rehearsal studios exist, then large-scale works will not emerge either, because ideas and visions gradually adapt themselves to the spaces in which they are rehearsed.

I also believe it is important to have places and spaces in which social norms and labels can be unsettled; spaces in which people do not judge themselves according to familiar categories and are not judged by others according to those categories either. In my workshops, I try to open up such spaces. Everyday life offers few opportunities to experience one's own body and one's relationship to others in a multiplicity of ways. This gives rise to spaces of experience that do not exist outside the dance studio. The dancing group creates a fragment of a world that does not yet exist.

I want to create spaces free from fear, where people can move without perceiving deficits within themselves, without judging themselves. I want to embrace dance as an emancipatory practice that leads the body away from doubt and tendencies towards withdrawal.

Sound and music are invisible wave-bodies that are deposited in the molecules of the air. Sound is difficult to contain; it spreads as far as the air can carry it. In the theatre, this means that it draws no boundary between the stage and the auditorium. It can connect the two spaces, allowing them to merge into one another. I can close my eyes in order not to see, but I cannot close my ears; I cannot evade sound. Sound is a medium that is deeply bound up with dance and emotion.

AUDIENCE

I do not show a piece; I share a piece. I do not show what I have created; I share it with the audience.

What matters to me is the sharing, transmission and transformation of energies. There are projects in which energy spills over from the stage into the audience. When audience members say after a performance, "I wish I could have joined in", that is wonderful. In those moments, a piece becomes part of a larger movement, something that can be transmitted, carried forward and expanded.

The audience is invited to broaden its gaze, to question its own way of looking, to reflect on the biography of its gaze. Often, one finds oneself watching oneself watching a performance. New processes of sorting and re-sorting begin, and these often take time. That is why it is important that some performances last a long time. Processes of perception can be set in motion; they can unfold, rearrange themselves and transform.

For me, art and pedagogy form a network. I enjoy translating my artistic approaches for people with and without dance experience, for audience members who are interested in dance and who wish to move themselves and experience what the performers on stage experience, what preoccupies me as a choreographer. The work of translating and mediating my practice helps to sharpen and clarify my artistic methods.

Increasingly, I am searching for a participatory performance format that oscillates between performance, workshop and club. In this format, performers and audience members encounter one another on different levels. The performers act as coaches, sharing embodied, tactile and perception-expanding forms of knowledge that enable audience members to engage in bodily experimentation themselves. At the same time, there is the opportunity to watch performative sequences created by the performers. What emerges are immersive spaces that offer everyone present multiple ways of inhabiting and engaging with them.

ARTISTIC WORKING PROCESSES

I write down ideas or sketch them in a notebook. The performers improvise in response to these ideas and impulses.

An exchange begins, a living process. Spontaneity is an essential part of it. There is no fixed script for a piece. I approach rehearsals with openness and receptiveness, allowing myself to be surprised by what jumps out at me, because it is usually the real, physical space that tells me where the journey is headed, not my notebook.

A good question has no end. There are pieces that remain unfinished in my mind even after their premiere. A good question sets ideas in motion.

I work with amateurs and professionals. I work with both on equal terms. For me, someone is a professional if we can work together professionally.

Non-human performers are also part of the ensembles I work with.

Fluidity entails mobility, a way of thinking and moving beyond binary logic. This is why slime has become an important material in my work: it visualises and embodies my fascination with transformative processes. It is an autonomous, wilful and unpredictable performer in its own right, one that productively challenges and undermines my role as a choreographer, because it behaves and moves differently depending on the temperature of the room, the temperature of the water and the amount of oxygen it receives.

One of the greatest gifts a body can receive is time. In long-duration improvisations, it becomes possible to let go of the expectations that inhibit the creative flow. As a result, the range of movement expands, and the bodily archive can be replenished with new movements. In extended improvisations, boredom, tiredness, exhaustion and frustration are all part of the process. Often, the first thing one dances is what one already knows. I always say: "Dance your patterns. Live them, let them out, and don't demand something new of yourself straight away. And if you become bored, allow it. If you become bored with yourself, allow that too. Don't interrupt the improvisation, every phase of it matters. Lived stagnation can lead to a new creative surge. Creativity comes in waves. It moves in waves. It does not obey commands or expectations."

I enjoy watching people arrive at a movement and not question it. We so often doubt ourselves, what we are doing, how we are doing it, why we are doing it. Questioning oneself is important. But it feels so good, for once, to be free of doubt and to stop interrogating oneself, to arrive at an answer and remain there.

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2006

insert.eins/ eskapade

Concept, Choreography: Doris Uhlich
Dramaturgical Advisor: Christine Standfest
Performance: Hans Breitschopf, Peter Fenz, Uschi Halmágyi, Pauline Haslinger, Irma Jindra, Herta Kressnik, Martin Nechvatal, Frédéric Nedoma-Ohnhäuser, Susanna Peterka, Helene Schmidhuber, Otto Schödl, Franz Stockhandl, Elfie Sus, Doris Uhlich, Ilse Urbanek, Werner Vockenhuber and additional guest performers Lighting: Andrea Korosec
With the support of imagetanz artist in residence and Dans in Kortrijk Supported by the City of Vienna – Culture (MA 7)

Premiere: 3 March 2006 (Bellaria Cinema Vienna and dietheater Künstlerhaus, as part of imagetanz Festival, Vienna)

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It is early March 2006. Austria is governed by the second Schüssel administration, a coalition between the Austrian People's Party (ÖVP) and Haider's Alliance for the Future of Austria (BZÖ). Doris and I have known each other since 2002 through our work with the Vienna-based theatercombinat on a series of intense, intimate, large-scale productions, among them *anatomie sade/wittgenstein*. At the time, we are rehearsing Aeschylus's *Persians* under the direction of Claudia Bosse, as part of the series *tragödienproduzenten*.

A number of strands thus converge in the impulses that shape Doris's first independent work, for which she had invited me to contribute as a dramaturg: her experience as a dance educator; the shared rehearsals with performers without prior ties to the theatre scene and of different generations; an interest in urban space; and an invitation from imagetanz, curated by Bettina Kogler, to present the work at what was then dietheater Künstlerhaus (later brut, now the Vienna State Opera's NEST venue). And then, of course, there is the Bellaria cinema – that extraordinary place – where, until 2019, a devoted regular audience gathered daily to watch entertainment films from the 1930s and 1940s.

Situated somewhere between an anachronistic remnant of the Nazi era and a repository for memories of another age, the place elicits from newcomers to Vienna like myself a mixture of fascination, affectionate irony and unease. Yet there is also a desire to engage artistically with this residue of supposedly bygone emotions, and perhaps even in the form of an artistic-political intervention. Doris translates her fascination with the place into artistic form: first through an interest in the cinematic pathos of the period – a mode that, particularly within the contemporary dance and performance context of the 2000s, appears exhausted, discredited, and overwritten by modernist abstraction – and then through an interest in the people who return to the Bellaria again and again, or rather: who seem almost to haunt it.

So Doris begins searching for these people and for others, performers from an older generation. Some of them we already know, among them long-standing collaborators both on her own work and on theatercombinat's productions (Susanna Peterka, Elfi Sus and Ilse Urbanek). I find myself hesitating. I struggle with figures such as Paula Wessely and Zarah Leander, the most prominent actresses associated with the Nazi regime, with Wessely's role in *Heimkehr* for example. (After all, I come from the context of Jelinek's *Burgtheater*, and more broadly from the antifascist German Left.) So I begin to learn. I learn about the civil war in Vienna in 1934 – the same year in which *Maskerade*, the film that would later serve as the basis for the performance, was released.

Through conversations with Viennese historian friends, I learn about the "spirit of Lagerstraße" and the consensus culture of the Second Republic. Gradually, I begin to approach these histories differently. And we ask ourselves: what might a form of memory and presence look like that is triggered by cinematic images, by gestures and poses extracted from film and reactivated in the live moment, migrating into the sensuality of (self-)touch, summoning emotions even as they subtly unsettle them? Which bodies, which time? Is a critical gesture/a gesture of critique even possible without already presupposing negation and distance? Rather than working from narrative plots, Doris isolates stereotyped gestures of (self-)touch and cinematic poses from the films themselves. These are enlarged or miniaturised, slowed down or accelerated, transferred onto different bodies and biographies, and – through juxtaposition – composed for two distinct spaces: the cinema, where the performers appear in front of the moving film images on the screen, and the black box.

In between comes a walk with the audience from the cinema behind the Volkstheater to the Künstlerhaus at Karlsplatz; an attempt to smuggle urban space itself into the work, an "insert". Images, rhythms, smells, passers-by, movements: all of it serving to overwrite the history immobilised in the film's celluloid with the city as it happened to be performing itself on that particular day. I believe it was raining; in any case, I remember the weather as *schiach* – dreary, unpleasant. And then, finally, we arrive in the shared temporality of the theatre.

What remains – thinking suddenly of Alexander Kluge's film title *The Power of Emotion* – is the memory of a strangely fragile, strangely unfinished, immensely moving, and in any case fearless performance that, twenty years ago, marked the beginning of Doris Uhlich's artistic trajectory. Fearless because it exceeded the conventional parameters of representational formats in so many ways: duration, venues, audiences. But also because of an attitude towards the material that might well be described as "unpolitical" – and which perhaps for that very reason allowed "the emotions", and their corporeality, to emerge with and against nostalgic repetition, manifesting historicity, vulnerability, and intensely charged ambivalence within every single gesture. To this day, I remain preoccupied by the disturbance the work triggered in me in relation to the formulation, valid though it is, "No forgiveness! No forgetting!" A disturbance brought about through art made with people, one that plunged directly into the ambivalence of *Rührung* (of emotional stirring, affective movement), the entangled labour of affirmation; into *Bodies That Matter*. Pathos here not as reconciliation through violent elevation, but as an irreconcilably unsettling multiplicity of perspectives within the real.

PS

"What if the opposite of forgetting is not remembrance, but justice?"* – I read these words today, as I finally sit down to write this text, on the eightieth anniversary of the liberation of the Buchenwald concentration camp, in the speech by Omri Boehm that was never delivered there. Boehm ends with peace. We will continue making art.

Christine Standfest
(curator and dramaturg)

* Omri Boehm: "Das ist die Rede, die Omri Boehm nicht halten sollte", 6 April 2025, in: https://www.sueddeutsche.de/kultur/omri-boehm-kz-buchenwald-gedenken-rede-li.3231805 (Accessed on 5 September 2025).

/// The Bellaria cinema is located directly behind Vienna's Volkstheater. I used to pass by it often, noticing from the film posters in the window that an old film was screened there every day at four in the afternoon. In the foyer, there were coffee-house tables around which elderly people would sit, quietly waiting side by side for the film to begin. I asked the woman at the ticket counter who these people were. She told me there was a loyal, regular audience who would arrive up to two hours before the screening, spend the time in the foyer, yet hardly ever speak to one another. I became curious about who these people were and what connected them in their silent waiting. Only after some time did I realise that the films they watched were exclusively entertainment films produced in Austria and Germany between 1933 and 1945. After that, I began going regularly to the Austrian Film Archive, which at the time was still located in the Augarten, where I met Thomas Ballhausen, who worked there. Thomas gave me many of the films that were also shown at the Bellaria to watch. It was an uncanny feeling to sit alone in the small, darkened screening room at the archive, watching uncut and uncensored films. I found myself drawn into entertainment cinema designed to distract from the war. I learned that actresses at the time fulfilled specific functions: Paula Wessely embodied the "mother of the people", the idealized role of the caring mother, Zarah Leander represented the unattainable femme fatale, a seductive star. The functions assigned to these screen divas were reflected in their gestures as well. This is where my corporeal research began. I started isolating and dissecting the gestures of (self-)touch performed by the two actresses, embodying them myself. For the performance *insert.eins/eskapade*, I wanted to detach the cinematic gesture from the screen in order to bring gestures from the past into contact with bodies in the present, to confront them, placing them in a spotlight altogether different from the light cast by a film projector. \\\

Doris Uhlich

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/// During the screening of *Maskerade*, we sat among the audience mimicking the gestures of the actors on screen, which, unsurprisingly, irritated the cinema-goers around us. They tried to stop us from continuing by saying: "Pst!", "Quiet!", "What's going on?", "Cut it out!" and the like. Then they decided to ignore us – "They'll stop eventually..." But that was precisely when things really began. Some of us suddenly stood up and started undressing, stripping naked in the middle of the cinema. At that point, the audience became genuinely agitated. What followed was a kind of uproar – a proper *Bahö*, as they say in Vienna. But it was already too late. Before anyone could hold us accountable, we quickly got dressed again and "escaped" through the cinema's emergency exit. The spell had been broken, and I think the audience was left uncertain whether what they had just witnessed had actually happened or whether it had been some kind of Fata Morgana. \\\

Susanne Peterka
(performer)

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/// Performers emerge in the light cast by the cinema's film projection. Images travel across the unfamiliar screen of the body, while a repertoire of distinctive, at times exaggerated gestures and movements is doubled: tilted heads, outstretched arms, slumping shoulders open up a space of emphasis, dialogue and critique. In *insert.eins/eskapade*, ephemeral presentation and media-technological representation enter into fleeting yet potent constellations. Light falls on staged – and, not least, vulnerable – bodies, on an ensemble unconventional in the best sense of the word, positioning itself between screen and projector. Sequences of movement and relational dynamics become legible, as deliberate deviations inscribe themselves into the live reproductions and reenactments of the film images.
By directly engaging with the remarkably extensive body of German-language filmmaking from the years 1933 to 1945, Doris and her performers draw on a distinctly melodramatic vocabulary of movements, gestures and bodily interactions. *insert.eins/eskapade* revels in laying bare the normative and political forces at work within gesture and narrative. The images produced through these dialogues between film and performance have remained with me ever since, and while the Bellaria cinema currently embarks on a promising future under a new management, inertia and time, regardless of all this, enter once more into their usual dusty alliance. \\\

Thomas Ballhausen
(literature and film scholar)

2007

und

Concept, Choreography: Doris Uhlich
Dramaturgy: Andrea Salzmann
Performance: Hans Breitschopf, Peter Fenz, Uschi Halmágyi, Christa Himmel-Schwarzmüller, Pauline Haslinger, Frédéric Nedoma-Ohnhäuser, Susanna Peterka, Otto Schödl, Efie Sus, Ilse Urbanek, Werner Vockenhuber, Pia Voldet
Co-production: imagetanz and insert (Theaterverein) Supported by the City of Vienna – Culture (MA 7)

Premiere: 14 March 2007 (dietheater Künstlerhaus, imagetanz Festival, Vienna)

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und

Let me begin with a memory: I first encountered Doris Uhlich in 2007 at the opening of brut – then still known as dietheater Künstlerhaus – under the direction of Thomas Frank and Haiko Pfost. Part of the opening programme was a small performance by Doris Uhlich together with a gardener. It revolved around plants, around nurturing and care, around growth. *Impatiens walleriana* was the title, the "Busy Lizzie". Uhlich approached the subject with both seriousness and humour. *Keep at it*, I remember thinking.
In 2008, I was artistic director of the seventh edition of the Politik im freien Theater festival in Cologne. Politics in theatre – what exactly did that mean? Old and new Nazis, reunification and continuing division hardly seemed sufficient anymore. Identity, diversity, climate and inclusion were not yet dominant topics – though that is not to say they were absent from theatre. But what exactly constituted "political theatre"? Or rather: what made theatre political? How was politics negotiated on stage? What might the political in theatre encompass?
Somewhat later, I saw *und*.
At the beginning of the piece, nine performers sat on a row of chairs along the left edge of the stage. They were between 59 and 88 years old. One after another, they stood up; they walked, stood, sat, lay down on stage; one woman danced, seemingly recalling the ballet training of earlier years. Most of the movements were everyday gestures; they were the movements of ageing and aged bodies, moving records of the lives lived within those bodies.
Alongside this, one performer spoke about the housing estate where she lived, about the different flats and tenants, about the family who, after complaints from neighbours, chose to live without their children in the apartment. Later she recounted a coach trip to a hotel in Italy and the deckchair assigned to her there. Everyday life. As she spoke, the elegantly dressed woman slowly undressed until she stood naked on stage; this too belonged to her everyday reality, and somehow she seemed only to gain in elegance and dignity.
The 2000s were the years in which documentary theatre reinvented itself: Rimini Protokoll, Hofmann & Lindholm, She She Pop, Matthaei & Konsorten, Hans-Werner Kroesinger, and many others. The festival eventually adopted the motto *echt* – "real(ly)" – conceived less as a statement than as a colloquial-ironic question.
In Doris Uhlich's work, "the real" emerged through her meticulous exploration of movement, shaped by a deep and genuine interest in the people standing on stage. None of them were professional performers or dancers, but all had bodies marked by life's experiences. Everything was equally real and staged, exactly as documentary practice demands.
und was a play with time: the past surfaced within the present. *und* was a play for time: the choreography moved slowly, granting the people on stage, with astonishing assurance, the time they needed to bring past time back to life, gathering energy whenever actions began to condense. *und* was a play

against time: by animating the past, it suspended time itself. Yet *und* never became nostalgic: nothing was idealised, everything was acknowledged, without judgment, yet with deep appreciation.
The "and" in *und* connected past and present, the performers among themselves – as they watched over and supported one another, always ready to help – the audience and the performers, movement and movement and movement, word and word and word.
Unforgettable was the oldest member of the ensemble, the 88-year-old Frédéric Nedoma-Ohnhäuser: a small man with an expressive face, a slight hunchback, and tap shoes. He opened the performance with his slow walk across the stage and later provided one of its climactic moments with a tap-dance number. Was this not political too? Isn't the question of how people live together in society being negotiated here – In the stories about the apartment building, in the recognition afforded to older people? *Body politics* was a fashionable term at the time; age was becoming a topic of discussion – which bodies appear on stage, especially in dance? How do we look at the everyday lives of people whose existence appears unspectacular? Doesn't attentive observation itself transform it into an event? The precision of a choreography without virtuosity? The belief in the significance of bodies not trained for the stage appearing on stage.
For me, *und* became a key work for defining the breadth of the Politik im freien Theater festival: alongside migration and enlightenment, reunification and dictatorships, capitalism and fundamentalism, there was also this tender exploration of the lives of a handful of people.
Let me conclude with another memory: the enthusiastic final applause after *und* at Theaterhaus Ehrenfeld in Cologne in November 2008. It was the production's first guest performance outside Austria. The performers did not want to leave the stage, overcome with emotion and joy seeing the audience's reaction. Everything was real: the play with time, what was going on inside the performers, and what was going on inside the audience.

Rainer Hofmann
(dramaturg)

/// I can still remember the moment in the rehearsal studio when I asked Frédéric, who was 86 at the time, to lower himself to the floor and stand up again. It took him twenty minutes. I had never anticipated it would take so long. He was slow, cautious, focused. As I watched him, my mind began racing; his deceleration opened up questions for me about fragility, presence, and aesthetics in dance. And all the while I kept thinking: "This is incredible. It's so beautiful." \\\

Doris Uhlich

/// I remember.

I remember that evening, which for me was one of the first encounters with Doris Uhlich. *And* with the people she so often enables to shine. *And* is not meant here as an introduction to an addition, a supplement. Rather, it marks precisely that sense of shared presence which is so often proclaimed in the performing arts and so rarely actually lived. In Doris Uhlich's work, this *and* is always meant in a concrete, real sense. *And* togetherness. *And* visibility. *And* appreciation. *And*, always, art. Artistic practice as political practice. In her *und* from 2007, people "read as old" – diverse in their origins and life trajectories, in the ways they reflect on their lives – sat, spoke, moved and looked back, precisely by bringing this "earlier time" into a present, a present unfolding with us, right here and now. "Everything converges in the present moment." (Frédéric Nedoma-Ohnhäuser) I remember the paths they traced in the French Hall – then still part of *dietheater* – the lines they drew, sitting side by side, observing one another and us, then again becoming, each in their own right, a beam of light, a radiant star in Uhlich's choreographic cosmos, which for most of us at the time was still so new. A young star in the firmament of those arts that are always searching for stars and for youth, she stood here consciously among all those "old" stars, which she perceived in their own luminosity and whose radiance she brought so uniquely close to us. *And* – continues to *do so*. To this day I still see the stars that Doris Uhlich brought down for us nearly 20 years ago and made visible beside us in their radiance. *And* with them: us; and our shared *and*-being. *und* remains my unforgettable entry into the Uhlich universe. \\\

Angela Heide
(dramaturg and curator)

/// The beginnings of Doris Uhlich's artistic practice, and her early piece *und*, emerged at a time when we were seeing an enormous number of community projects. Time and again, this led to situations in which the mere fact of being on stage together, and taking pleasure in that togetherness, seemed to take precedence over artistic ambition. Then I came across *und*, in which Doris found a remarkable artistic form for giving space to people, some of them already of very advanced age, and allowing them to be seen on stage. The performers had developed an astonishing precision in the way they used their bodies and in what they negotiated through them. When one of the performers attempted to stand up from a crawling position, it took such an incredibly long time… For me, the perception of time was absolutely essential to the piece. There was this sense of physically sharing in movements that you yourself would normally manage in a matter of seconds suddenly acquiring duration, stretching into extended time, and how this deceleration can give rise to a new precision in relation to the body. That really blew me away back then. \\\

Nikolaus Selimov
(choreographer, dance educator, dramaturg)

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