# DANCE ON MARS

**Jette Büchsenschütz**
*12:52 PM, Mar 11*

i actually dont get the title – i only know its a David bowie song right? maybe I am missing something here?

**Kasia Wolińska**
*4:45 PM, Mar 11*

Yes, it is a Bowie's song, i started from there but then actually thought about two different planets as 2 camps in the cold war (im reading dispossessed by le guin now :)) but also mars as a red planet and mars as god of war felt both adequate for writing about stories that happened 'elsewhere' according to official narratives, or might have not happen at all.. does it make sense? In the song bowie is actually asking – is there life on mars, so i wanted to ask the same question about dance in the communist countries :)

**Jette Büchsenschütz**
*9:46 PM, Mar 11*

love it!

**anka herbut**
*11:45 AM, Mar 30*

I get the whole beauty that stretches out behind this title but I am also afraid it may be difficult to decode it. I wouldn't get all of what you have just explained here without your clarification and that would be a pity. Kasia, do you think maybe to add some gentle tip(s) in the body of this text which would make it possible to grasp? I think we can't assume that everyone knows Bowie's song or Ursula K. Le Guin's book.

**Kasia Wolińska**
*11:48 AM, Mar 30*

i wonder since we talked once about leaving some comments unresolved if that would be the way? so to leave this thread of comments as it is, unedited as an insight into our process. i would find it best as explaining the title throughout the text would feel a bit strange :))

## KASIA WOLIŃSKA

Dear Comrade,

It's been a while since our last contact. I am writing to you from a muddy place, from the *future anterior*. I am crossing the ruins of a better world that did not happen, I am salvaging others' memories, I commune in their past dreams and high hopes. I wish to eventually arrive at a place where the monuments of historical truths and imperial impulses lay flat, where the flora and fauna rejoice at the walls and borders opening, and the skies becoming peaceful and clear.

> "Okay, so my last question is very different from the previous ones – I want to ask about dancings[1]. Did you attend?"
>
> "Ah, yes, it was very common, it was marvelous. Everyone was going. It was the only good thing (about communism)."
>
> (from the interview I conducted with my grandfather Rysiek / December 2022 / the living room of his house in Gdańsk Wrzeszcz)

My grandpa Rysiek loves cats and us – his family. He does that truly and generously and I love him deeply, for he has accompanied me since the moment I was born – in a caring, playful and inspiring way. His life, as many would say, could become a movie script and I have been lucky to listen to his stories weaving fiction and reality in a colorful and adventurous manner. From him I learnt about the dancing-s of memory and the ambiguity of ways in which communism is remembered and re-lived. We also share a passion for history books. But above all, ever since I was a kid, we danced, played and talked.

[1] *Dancing* (Pl. *densing*) – a social occasion in which dancing, eating and drinking was collectively performed to live music. It was taking place in Gdańsk Wrzeszcz (and many other places *around the Warsaw Pact*) at Klub Garnizonowy (former officers' casino) which my grandparents Teresa and Rysiek were attending together with many others – people of various social standings and occupations – every Saturday evening. Bringing one's own food was allowed, the soldiers from the next door barracks, incl. my grandpa, were attending in civil clothes to not provoke the civilians, though, as my grandpa recalled, every dancing was inevitably ending with a *bitka* (a punch-up). Excessive alcohol consumption played a role in some (most) of the cases.

In the photo I am attaching to this letter, my grandpa and I are dancing in the living room of his house. I am around one year old. The room is now his ever-growing memory container where we sometimes sit and talk about his life (the tea is served in the finger-burning communist glasses with dancing devils). There I spent joyful days of family celebrations, ordinary visits and numerous movie Fridays when I would sleep over and watch *X Files* on TV with my grandma Terenia. One dark night, when I was 13, my beloved grandma passed away in that room. Though it has gone through several transformations since then, for me it always smells of love and loss. In 2021 I asked my grandpa if we could reconstruct the dances we danced when I was a kid and he agreed. It was easy, as if we had never stopped practicing them. My feet on his feet and slowly we turned in a strange waltzing manner, the moment we started I bursted into laughter and so did he. There is no other joy like that of dancing with my grandfather. I felt that only then when we repeated our little phrases the room lit up, our dancing elevated death, the history turned with us. And here I am – writing to you about the cause that concerns both me and you, and all of us really: the joy and the importance of dancing.

I hope we can agree when it comes to stating the relevance of dance in our shared struggle for equality and emancipation of all lives on the planet. At present, when the politicality of dance is either largely trivialized or instrumentalized for the sake of capital's accumulation and advancement of personal careers and institutional self-affirmation, I am continuously called to the histories of dancers and dancing bodies that remain unpopular, complicated and often rather unknown. I am looking for past-present-future comrades who tested the limits of dancing and often paid a high price for their visions and choreographic courage. I am excavating the voices, trying to break up the silent consensus about the legitimacy of (only) Western dance and its democratic spirit, in that I continuously attempt to construct new lineages and paradoxical genealogies, forming a company of those dead and alive where the case of dance's revolutionary power and socialist agenda can be tested once again and opened towards the future.

"We felt that our appearance at the mass funeral was a sort of test of our fidelity to our group and manifestation of our willingness to enter the ranks of the working class revolutionary movement."

(New Dance Group: First Annual Recital brochure)

During the workers protests in Kentucky in 1932, a teenage communist organizer, Harry Simms, was shot dead by an off duty law official. The ongoing protests had been responding to the growing poverty and unemployment at times following the 1929 Wall Street crash. The Great Depression dispossessed many, hitting hard the most vulnerable actors of society. While the socio-economic situation of the 1930s stressed the importance of the socialist policies, the radical decade would eventually become a stage for the swansong of the Communist Party of the USA.

The death of Simms became a symbol of the working class struggle, with the *Daily Worker* and the Communist Party of the USA (CPUSA) pronouncing him a martyr who died a revolutionary death[2]. His body was transported by train to New York where the funeral procession took place. There, in the aftermath of the funeral and in resonance with Simms' prematurely and tragically interrupted revolutionary work, the New Dance Group (NDG) (1932-2009) was formed by Nadia Chilkovsky, Miriam Blecher, Edith Lambert, Edna Ocko, Rebecca Rosenberg, Pauline Schrifman, Grace Wylie and Fanya Geltman, all students of Hanya Holm's dance studio in NYC. Their vision of dance's role in the struggle for social justice combined the revolutionary form of modern dance with a socialist[3] rhetoric addressed largely to the working class people, and against the bourgeois and apolitical attitudes of their own teachers. By employing modern dance for a political cause, the young generation of left-leaning dancers attempted to simultaneously drift away from the expressivism of Isadora Duncan and modernist essentialism of Martha Graham, and move closer to socialist realism, in which dance would (yet again) partake in the articulation and overcoming of the social struggles. A year after the founding of the group in their anniversary bulletin the NDG proclaimed dance as a weapon and proposed it

[2] Victoria Phillips Geduld, "Performing Communism in the American Dance: Culture, Politics and the New Dance Group," *American Communist History*, vol. 7, no. 1 (2008): 48. https://core.ac.uk/download/pdf/161452507.pdf, (accessed April 26, 2023).

as one of the most important tools of the class struggle, carrying a power to cultivate class consciousness and prepare the ground (and bodies) for a socialist future.

The politics of the NDG aligned well with the agenda of the CPUSA and received party support for a while. At the same time, dance radicalism of the 1930s saw the growing nationalization of the narratives about modern dance which mirrored the rising international tensions – with Hitlers' and Mussolinis' ascents to power in the Europe's West as well as the yet to be uncovered intensification of the stalinist terror in the Soviet Russia. At home, the aforementioned Great Depression put the US economy and politics into question, all this happening against the backdrop of the ongoing rivalry with the USSR and the accelerating competition between capitalism and communism, which would find its culmination in the Long Long Cold War and the building of an ugly wall. Already by the end of the decade dancers of the NDG and their fellow travelers would be seen as a threat to the national order, with their work and ideologies classified as *Un-American*. The dancers and their allies would not openly align themselves with the communist agendas, most probably due to the sensed (experienced?) prejudice against the *Reds* incited by the local and national political functionaries and widespread in society. Yet while the dancers and choreographers of the radical era would still to some extent enjoy the transnational contacts and exchanges, the narratives were shifting significantly to express the growing chauvinism of the US (cultural) politics.

"That the American modern dance has shot way past the Central European may be partly imputed to America's escape from war's effects on its own territory. More is it ascribable to the bright land of its birth – a land where freedom and democracy are ideals at least; where traditions of human decency (in spite of arrant violations), of good will if not always of good manners, prevail; a land where all races (again in promissory note) are learning to work out their destiny together a land of great spaces and mighty projects that still leave room for the need of compensatory values in art."

(Margaret Lloyd, *The Borzoi Book of Modern Dance*)

[3]

A short note on *socialism* and *communism* and the way I want to propose the usage of those terms in my letter: *socialism/socialist* refers to a historical passage of ideas, reforms and processes, *communism* would be where and when those ideas finally would be realized to arrive at the classless and emancipated (global or local) human, or even better – planetary community. In my home country, the word *communism* was/is used to refer to the period between the end of WW2 and the end of the rule of the Communist Party in 1989. It carries both an oppressive and nostalgic character. Politically, the word still can be used to defame or offend someone, while some radical few would choose the word intentionally to mark their political belonging. For me, *communism* as an ideal has never been realized and the utopian aspect of it is overshadowed by the crimes of the regimes who claimed allegiance to a communist cause. It feels complicated to bring up those terms and in the text I attempt to negotiate some of those complexities.

The bloody spectacle of World War 2 would change dancing forever, as it would come to exist in societies entangled in the recent memories of horrific violence and loss, with millions of people dead, wounded or displaced, with crimes committed on a scale that will never be fully comprehended or repaired. Furthermore, on territories such as Poland, most of the modern dance legacy would be erased through the dispossession of the artists as well as destruction of infrastructures, archives and communities that were creating dance scenes prior to the war. I believe, dear Comrade, that, regardless of the contemporary fatigue in remembering the war, it is important to further historicize its global resonances as they laid ground for many still unresolved ethno-national conflicts, and even more importantly for our cause, they prepared the ground for the cold period in the ongoing wars. After WW2 during what was called McCarthyism, the whole historiographical trends would be revised to erase the communist underlayers of the radical era of the US-American modern dance, and some of the NDG dancers would be interrogated due to their alleged communist ties. When in the 1990s US-American culture would announce its victory over the communist project and globally promote its democratic, diverse social and political landscape of the Anglo-Saxon world in general, it would mystify and obscure the actual state agendas, which throughout the 20th century were based on the accumulation and hyperbolization of racialized and capitalist prejudices – starting from the Yellow Peril and following in the various stages of the Red Scare and the manic machine of the Cold War Era's politics and propaganda.

The dance artists I would like to visit with you, Comrade, worked within the paradoxical state regimes and their struggles unfolded at the intersections of (new) national, decolonial, anti-imperialist and anti-capitalist projects, many of which were violently overrun or came to an end as a result of their own corruption. But first, the re-articulation of dancers' tasks in the newly built societies and of the very conditions of dance's production and radiation were necessary for the realization of the post-World War 2 utopias.

The search for a unique dance identity of the modern socialist nations was taking place across the globe and

accelerated after WW2 in response to the world getting cut into two competing political and ideological camps. The Cold War period would bring much innovation in regards to modern dance, and contrary to the official narratives of the impenetrable Iron Curtain, dance forms and practitioners would still find their ways to travel, circulate and cross-contaminate. Modern dance – once a significantly transnational phenomena – was changing its direction to lose some of the avantgardist charm amongst the US-American white bourgeoisie but would greatly influence the development of the American Dance Theatre (e.g. Alvin Ailey). The legacies of the red choreographers such as Isadora Duncan or Jane Dudley would become uncomfortable or unfitting to the Cold War US rhetoric and agenda. At the same time, the forms and ideas contained within the frame of modern dance would find the continuation of their revolutionary life in the new socialist states seeking their own emancipations through dancing.

### BETTER DEAD THAN RED![4]

[4] Anticommunist slogan used in the US during the Cold War.

In 1988, shortly before the death of the USSR, Boris Groys, a Russian art theorist, wrote about the communist total art doctrine. In his book *The Total Art of Stalinism: Avant-Garde, Aesthetic Dictatorship, and Beyond* he described the revolutionary project which was initiated by the October Revolution (1917) as aiming at creation of a harmonious, organized world based on the *unitary artistic plan*. Such an artistic vision was focused not only on the mechanics of worldly production but it aspired to create a beautiful system, in which the grand ideology and ordinary lives of people would be entangled and inseparable, in which art would become total(itarian).

However, in the USSR of the 1930s the post-revolutionary hopes and enthusiasm were gradually replaced by the authoritarian terror virtuously incited by the Communist Party Leaders and cultural production would not be spared. What had been possible in the early post-revolutionary Soviet state as experiments with modernist form of dancing would soon be replaced by the return to ballet (once closely tied to the Tsarist period in Russia), which, especially in

the direct aftermath of the WW2, did not carry a stigma of the Nazi-collaboration (see: Mary Wigman, Gret Palucca or Rudolf von Laban). Though Stalin would admire and even mimic Hitler's political tactics like e.g. purges amongst the party members or exterminations of the undesired populations of the Soviet Empire, he would play a game that would convince many Soviet people and so called world leaders of his radical anti-fascist stance. The antifascist battle that was eventually won by capitalists and communists united briefly against a common enemy, would provide a fertile soil for the unsustainable growth of Stalin's superpower. With the introduction of the socialist realist doctrine in 1932, the role of art would be dictated by the state (the Party) and it would serve nothing else but the strengthening of the state's authority and control over its people. Art was envisioned as close to life, offered as a medium that affects across class divisions, being available not only as a professional occupation but as a space for various forms of amateur creativity and collectivizing experiences.

In the USSR not only was ballet back but (new) folk dancing was to constitute one of the pillars of Cold War cultural diplomacy. Already in the 1930s the new form of dancing was emerging from combining ballet with folk forms. The Igor Moiseyev Ballet (or Moiseyev State Academic Ensemble of Popular Dance) was founded in 1937 to realize the promise of the uniquely Soviet dance language, and Stalin liked it a lot. After Stalin's death, the company would tour the world to promote Soviet doctrine in both allied and rival countries. Similar companies would emerge across the states under the Soviet influence to propagate the form of folk-inspired choreographies in which the source movements were removed from their traditional settings, enhanced, and transformed into stage spectacles for the mass audiences.

The Soviet ballet tradition was influential also in one of the biggest *frenemies* of the USSR – the People's Republic of China. As a part of cultural and ideological exchange, many Soviet teachers would be working in China and disseminating the language and method of the Russian ballet. However, already in the 1940s, the artistic experiments had been conceived under the Japanese occupation of the country's mainland. What is known as the War of

Resistance was a military conflict between the Republic of China and the Japanese Empire, the latter exercising its imperial policies in the Pacific region and attempting to control Chinese territory and economy. The intensification of aggressive nationalism on the Japanese side came in the aftermath of the aforementioned Great Depression, whose effects had been felt around the globe and opened a way to the rise of fascist organizations and states – from Germany and Spain all the way to Japan. Against the background of the international conflict brewing for more than a decade and the atrocities of WW2, a new dance form was developed, which, according to the scholar Emily Wilcox, *symbolized the emerging Chinese socialist culture*. *New Yangge* was the first artistic genre formed according to Mao Zedong's principles of socialist art production formulated already in 1935. The new form of dance was a hybrid of Western styles of modern dancing with the folk tradition of the Chinese people – *yangge* being an already established folk practice.

Amongst many choreographers who contributed to the development of the *New Yangge*, I would like to stay for a moment with Dai Ailian – a dancer and choreographer born in Trinidad (a British colony at the time) to Chinese parents, who after her dance studies in London, moved to China in 1941. Under the influence of Central European modern dance taught by Kurt Joos and Sigurd Leeder[5] in their school in Dartington, UK, Dai took up the task of merging those dance traditions with the search for her own national (dance) identity in the land of her parents.

Yao Drum is a solo dance, Dai's modern choreographic take on a ceremonial dance of the Yao[6] community. The simple form of the dance is based on steps and jumping patterns and accompanied by the drumming also performed by a dancer. Similarly to the other comrade-choreographers of her time, Dai Ailian centered her practice on the search for a new movement language that would root itself in what she would see as a distinct Chinese cultural legacy and, at the same time, find its way to communicate the struggles and aspirations of the modern era in the country's history. Dai's work resonates not only with the transformation of China throughout the War of Resistance, Japanese Occupation and the Communist Revolution, but it also speaks to the

[5] German choreographers Joos and Leeder developed a movement method named after them in the Folkwangschule Essen, where they both taught. The method was based on the work of Rudolf von Laban (choreutics and eukinetics), one of the most important German modern dance choreographers and movement theorists of the 20th century. However, unlike Laban, who collaborated with the Nazi regime in the 1930s, Joos and Leeder emigrated to the UK before the start of WW2 and founded a school there.

[6] Yao people constitute a minority ethnic group inhabiting mostly the mountain regions of southern China (provinces of Hunan, Guangdong, Guangxi, Guizhou, and Yunnan). Amongst the Yao there are several languages differentiating particular groups, while the main religious orientation across various Yao communities is dictated by Taoism. The members of the community still today uphold practices of traditional craft, architecture, agriculture and social rituals concerning e.g. marriage or hair cutting.

choreographer's own experiences of migration, facing the colonial abuses and racial biases, looking for an identity and a sense of belonging – both politically and culturally. In her book *Revolutionary Bodies: Chinese Dance and the Socialist Legacy*, the aforementioned Emily Wilcox characterized Dai's work as emblematic for a whole generation of Chinese artists:

"Ultimately, Dai's vision of Chinese dance found audiences and collaborators in China because both were facing a similar conundrum at the time: how to find a form of cultural expression that neither assimilated into Eurocentric norms nor reproduced orientalist and racist conceptions of China, while also recognizing the internal variation and multiplicity that defined China as a modern nation."

A similar strategy based on employing stories and practices well rooted within the local/national communities of the newly emerging socialist nation-states characterized the work of Patricio Bunster – a Chilean communist[7] choreographer. In Catrala Desciende (1969) a 17th century heroine, who had gone down in history as a murderess of dozens of men, became an inspiration for the choreography. In Bunster's take on the story, a female protagonist danced with three male dancers representing a priest, a slave and a nobleman. The choreography served as a social commentary and pointed to the inequalities present in Chilean society at the time. The employment of the local tale was to grant to a wide range of audiences access to the contemporary choreographic work. Following the method of Joos-Leeder, Bunster focused his dance research not on particular style or technique but included pedestrian and labor movements to develop dance idioms that would be most appropriate for the particular choreographies. Such non-dance movements would be combined with Ausdruckstanz, Graham technique, Flamenco and Afro-Brazilian dance traditions as well as Chilean folk forms. Through such an expanded approach to dance vocabulary, Bunster affirmed dancing as close to life, as expressing the full potential of the human body and responding to a variety of human dreams and struggles.

[7] Using the description after Jens Giersdorf and his writing about Bunster's legacy.

"Dance is permeable to all influences, from high culture or low, without any social prejudice."

(Ramiro Guerra, *La Danza Amenazas y Resistencias*)

Meanwhile in Cuba, after some years of the guerilla war against Fulgencio Batista's regime, in 1959 the communist (el) comandante Fidel Castro became the prime minister. The process of transforming an island into a socialist, one-party state had begun and could not be interrupted by numerous assassination attempts, counter-revolutions, and embargos. At its wake, the new country needed a new dance form which would express the spirit and unique identity of the Cuban people. Suki John in her study of Cuban contemporary dance, *Contemporary Dance in Cuba: Tecnica Cubana as Revolutionary Movement*, proposed a beautiful description of the dancing culture of the island:

"In Cuba everyone dances, even the truck drivers, and they dance well. (...) Maybe it's because everyone's grandmother taught him or her to dance guaguanco, danzon, mambo and salsa (except Fidel, apparently, who is notorious for NOT dancing... among other things). Professional dance training is free and excellent, an investment the country makes in its talent. Dancers are respected, not trivialised."

In the aftermath of the Revolution, dancer and choreographer Ramiro Guerra was appointed as the director of the Department of Modern Dance at Teatro Nacional in Havana. Governmental support (in ideological and financial terms) was then offered to create a new revolutionary movement language – *técnica cubana*, which was born out of a synthesis of modern and indigenous dance vocabularies. The building of the technique, training method, and choreographic repertoire worthy of the new socialist state was founded in a desire for the form that would allow both individual and national belonging to be expressed in a virtuous manner. The formation of the New Wo(Man) through the work in/of the Conjunto Nacional de Danza Moderna and the revolutionary premises of the new technique were described by Guerra, who led the company since its foundation in 1957:

"It was necessary to create new dancers who would see modern dance not as a frivolous game, but instead a responsible work that serves a social function. We had to make them understand that the dancer isn't just an individual who dances, but also someone who thinks while dancing. In this way I think we have arrived at a nationalistic approach to the arts, in which we take folklore and elevate it to a universal category."

In *técnica cubana* the contemporary techniques of dance are interwoven with Afro-Cuban dance traditions, which is reflected not only in how the dancers move, but what themes are proposed through the choreographies, how *narratives* are constructed and how audiences are addressed. And above all, *técnica* is built on a deep conviction about the significance of dancing both for the individual growth and the development of society. Thanks to the received state support, the dancers and choreographers committed to the cause could dedicate themselves entirely to dance practice and research as their work. Over the decades, *técnica* was developed and disseminated and it survived the fall of communism and the so-called Special Period in modern Cuban history. It seems to have succeeded in expressing the cultural legacy of the people attuned to dance as something that is both done and watched, dance that realizes its potential in abolishing class divisions and intersecting individual existence with the lives of the generations. And now...

A short pause for the words of Fredric Jameson from his book *The Political Unconscious*:

"All class consciousness of whatever type is Utopian insofar as it expresses the unity of a collective."

Such a utopian unity seemed to have been at stake in many of the dance developments that we are visiting. At the time of the new world order being constituted after WW2, not only were the socialist agendas supporting the formation of the new collective identities, but also the decolonial struggles across continents were bringing to the foreground the question of belonging and collectivity that rooted themselves in the traditions eradicated by the

colonizers. The aspiration of early modern dance to propose a transnational language of human expression was revised and reinvented in places such as Cuba or Chile, but also in the German Democratic Republic (GDR), seeking its new cultural identity under the shadow of the Berlin Wall. As dance historian and dancer Mark Franko wrote when elaborating on the legacy of the New Dance Group, what was recognized by the socialist dancers and choreographers as crucial for creation of the utopian possibility, was the *felt politics* – the ability to live through states and emotions that would eventually bridge the individual experience with the life of a community. Such a future-oriented readiness bound with the discipline and joy of working towards a shared goal was to be trained and nurtured through dancing. In the *Report of the Conference that Organized the Workers Cultural Federation of the New York District* from 1932 we can read the words of leftist journalist Mike Gold:

"You must enter the emotions of the worker, you must bind him to the movement through every part of his fiber."

The unity and collective *awakening* which I imagine was at work on the socialist dancefloors, was a realization of self-transgression and commoning of experience that could be offered by a mass dance, watching a dance performance or creating one, by dancing with others – either dead or living. Let's not forget that dancing has been a vital part of ceremonies and rituals serving the renewal and reproduction of human communities. By proposing rhythm, movement patterns and group formations, it played an important role in either affirming or overturning social relations and hierarchies. In 1978 Irena Turska, Polish dance historian, wrote about *Krzesany* by Conrad Drzewiecki in the following way:

"(A)nd like in the primitive ritual, in which dance works to unite a group toward a common goal, it is so in the choreography – the base of which is dance filled with the collective spirit and power of a mass emotional excitement. The other inspiration taken from the ceremonial tradition is an organisation (of the choreography) in a circle which itself carries a magical significance."

In 1977 in the People's Republic of Poland, Conrad Drzewiecki, the choreographer and leader of the recently funded (with state support) Polish Dance Theatre, created his most seminal work *Krzesany* and ritual was at the center of the choreographic experiment. The group choreography composed to the contemporary music by Wojciech Kilar (inspired by the folk traditions from the Polish mountains) was based on only six steps constituting a traditional folk dance related to the coming of spring and striking of the new fire. The choreography is best known thanks to its film documentation and re-edition done for public TV in 1979, in which the dance is set against the background of the Tatra Mountains. I must say, dear Comrade, that I am a big fan of *Krzesany*, I find its simple form and the folk spirit simultaneously very contemporary and yet carrying something of a deep time within it. Unlike the folk dance companies that were also emerging in Poland throughout the Cold War, Drzewiecki's proposal drifted away from the notion of grand spectacle and the generic *cepelia*[8] aesthetics and it proposed a rather modest yet powerful form of a collective and affective reunion. In the 1974 interview, Conrad Drzewiecki painted his artistic agenda as bridging the pasts and futures:

"We want to go out into the world with something entirely new. The old things would find their place too, but under different principles. (...) Dance Theatre must express so much and with such power that it can replace everything – old and new, give the spectator maximum amount of the artistic and aesthetic experiences, which, when expressed through dance, would give the spectators a full satisfaction."

The desire to arrive at the junction of the old and new, hybridization and deborderization of the dance practice were expressed through the turn towards locality and folklorism elevated to the plane of universal, transnational communication and they seemed very much aligned with the traditions of modern dance. When in 1956 Patricio Bunster took over the position of the director of the Ballet Nacional Chileno, he too would soon shift the focus of the company's repertoire towards indigenous traditions, strengthening what he described as *ballet americano* understood as

[8] *Cepelia* (CPLiA) stands for the communist central association of artisans and folk crafts(wo)men, which existed in the People's Republic of Poland between 1949 and 1990. Its main task was to sell the crafts produced through the associated manufacturers. After the end of communism, the shops remained operating and the name became a signifier for the generalized folkloric aesthetics. Today to refer to *cepelia aesthetics* means mostly the generic folk-inspired objects that are sold as souvenirs from Poland or to describe e.g. restaurants stylized on the folk huts where different regional influences are randomly mixed.

the Latin American way of doing contemporary dance that rejected the cultural hegemonies of the western/northern hemispheres and looked towards the indigenous, vernacular legacies of dance. Bunster's dedication to reaching broad audiences found its perhaps most spectacular expression in the touring of the Ballet Nacional Chileno, who presented the works often on ad hoc open air stages in even the most remote rural areas of the country. It is said that some of the performances were watched by up to 2000 people. Introductions as well as after talks were offered to the public. The influence of the Joos-Leeder school would be present not only in the politically resonant choreographies of Bunster, but later in his career in the mass dance choreographies which mobilized up to one hundred thousand amateur dancers.

During the reign of the socialist president Salvador Allende in the early 1970s, Bunster and his peers would work in direct collaboration with the government, exploring the potential of dance as a soft weapon and advocating for its increased public presence and state support for dance. When in 1973 Allende was assassinated in the military putsch, Bunster fled to East Germany where he would spend the following 12 years in exile.

And, perhaps there is no better place to observe the Cold War paradoxes and separation anxieties than the Germany divided by the Wall for a few decades. The division was often imagined/narrated as having power to split the world into two irreconcilable timelines of historical (un)development. When it comes to dance, before WW2 Germany was home to a rich modern dance tradition (*Ausdruckstanz*) and hosted artists that would become surprisingly influential in the postwar era. I already mentioned before how the Joos-Leeder school in the UK continued to teach and develop the artistic practices and approaches that were initiated by choreographers who had been confronted with the Nazi instrumentalisation of art for propagandistic purposes. Rudolf von Laban or Mary Wigman proved to be useful for the regime for the time being, and the decisions they made would not necessarily overshadow their work or legacy after the end of WW2. In the aftermath of the war, modern dance thrived in a sort of diaspora, resonating both as a transnational phenomena and a tool in redefining national

identities. Jens Giersdorf, an East German dance historian, in his unique study *The Body of the People: East German Dance since 1945* described the postwar condition of dance:

"East German choreographers reinvented a tradition after World War II by tapping into selected areas of German dance, such as movement choirs, folk vocabulary, and Soviet and German mass movements. These invented traditions were meant to validate East Germany as a progressive successor of German Culture and to create a socialist national identification distinct from the West by updating movement traditions in relation to socialist corporeal ideals."

We can see, dear Comrade, that many choreographic strategies once used by the Nazi Ministry of Propaganda, would find their second life under the communist rule. Yet what is well known and documented is that postwar German dance production concerns almost entirely West German artists, which should not surprise us if we agree that the labor of historicizing dance is a political act and it serves purposes dictated by the interests of the winners in any historical battle. Leaving all Pina Bausches and Kurt Jooses behind, let's look at something that theoretically had no right to exist (according to the Western narration of the cultural superiority over the Eastern bloc) – East German Tanztheater.

East Germany under Soviet influence continued investing in balletic forms but also encouraged the development of new artistic idioms that would emphasize the autonomy of its cultural production, as well as an autonomy of dance itself being one of the most valuable of the socialist art disciplines. In 1965, choreographer and modern dancer Tom Schilling moved to East Berlin to take over the leadership of the newly formed dance company in Komische Oper Berlin. With socialist realism being the official doctrine concerning art production, the question of dance's relationship to socialist life, its representational and educational qualities, as well as its capacity to convey an essential truth about human nature would be at work for the decades to come. Dilemmas and aspirations that accompanied the work of Schilling would be emblematic for the general development of dance in socialist countries and they would unfold

against the background of a long debate about modernism, national identity, and vision of the common future. According to socialist realism, the performing arts should be able to not only represent but also critique the life of socialist societies and inspire the audience (while providing a space for self-identification with what is presented on stage) to work toward communism as the ultimate realization of socialist politics. Such simultaneously utopian and utilitarian goals would not mean that the art produced was crude or offensively didactic.

Schilling himself would employ a variety of strategies that we could have seen with other choreographers described above, which would lead to the creation of unique artistic qualities that often challenged the square logic of the party's culture commanders. In his 1971 *Rhythmus*, he proposed a mixture of jazz, pedestrian, folk, ballet and modern dance vocabulary while leaving some space to improvisation, which has been historically ascribed to US-American (post-modern) dance[9]. By allowing the audience to enter the ambiguous space of witnessing improvised, made in a moment choreographies, the liveness of the performative event awoke the presence of the watchers. In such a gesture the labor of dance was emphasized and unconstrained by ideologically correct dance routines, and as such the humanness of dancing could be uncovered as a unifying, commoning tool. Not to mention the joy that was crucial to many performances staged in Komische Oper, where the *high* art and *low* entertainment would intermingle and produce space for art to be experienced by the audience without any initiation or education.

Improvisation and multidisciplinary artistic collaboration in dance practice/production that were present in the works of socialist choreographers supported by the state and having access to stable infrastructure, were also features of the underground dance work-ings of the era. The unofficial artistic production granted more space for disobedience in relation to the artistic directions imposed by the communist doctrines, but it was at the same time harder to establish those within highly controlled societies. Artists such as Fine Kwiatkowski managed to subvert the official art production schemes and used some of the established

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I am thinking here about e.g. the Judson Church's legacy and related occurrences that were, and still are, an impactful export product to the belated countries (such as my home country) and which became an object of some fixation in many European curatorial and educational programmes, with works of Trisha Brown, Yvonne Rainer or Deborah Hay being reenacted, reconstructed, revised again and again as pinnacles of the compositional thought in (contemporary) dance production. Not only reliance on chance or improvisational experiments are a part of this legacy but also a certain formalism of choreographies which would differentiate them historically from the emotional/spiritual/folkloric dance practices of the communist or Afro-American choreographers, and set them apart from the modern dance expressivism and narratives.

performing art stages to present works standing in tension with the state agendas or demands. As Jens Giersdorf wrote in his book on East German dance, Kwiatkowski's approach to dance was very postmodernist in the way she played with improvisation, montage and demontage. A lack of technical and narrative consistency marked her work as dissident, never entering the institutional realm of GDR cultural production. What characterized Kwiatkowski and her generation of artists working in the 1980s was a refusal to conform to the state-opposition rhetoric, while a certain artistic disengagement with socialist ideals expressed the mood of the late phase in the Cold War when the collapse of communism was maybe still unimaginable and yet very much in the air.

And, as we are slowly approaching the end, dear Comrade, I want to bring back a consideration of the unique power of dancing – body to body communication. It was recognized by socialist states and dancing was rendered an important tool in preparing the ground for the revolutionary future. The felt politics so fundamental to the proletarian revolution would be incited, enabled, and trained through dancing available as a stage form and form of leisure, entertainment, and physical training. All the choreographers and dancers we have visited seemed to have understood that and dedicated themselves to transforming their societies through the art of dance. Such a powerful position of dance within socialist societies has been gradually weakened in the period of transformation, after the fall of the Berlin Wall. The capitalist progress which was sold to the countries of the communist bloc in its already decaying neoliberal form was one of the crucial factors leading to the disembodiment of social relations, cultures, and politics. Many ideas and dreams of the socialist choreographers were erased by the coming of the art market having only one sovereign – capital. Currently it is perhaps difficult to imagine the paradoxes, dilemmas and opportunities that informed our ancestral choreographers in experimenting, failing, and dreaming the dance paradigms which would eventually cross boundaries of social divisions and contest art historical lineages. I wonder where we are now? What has been forgotten? What needs to be reinvented and reimagined?

## THE END

“Take me to the magic of the moment
On a glory night
Where the children of tomorrow dream away
(dream away)
In the wind of change”

The change that was introduced after the fall of the wall did not quite correspond to the dreams of the generations fighting against the authoritarian, colonial, and capitalist powers. After decades of isolation and subsequent political humiliation of the postcommunist nations, I would like to propose some critical distance as a healthy response to the hegemonic narratives of the winners. The change that was promised turned out to be another unfreedom that we are yet to overcome. The generations of my parents and grandparents came to live through not only the fall of communism but also of democracy.

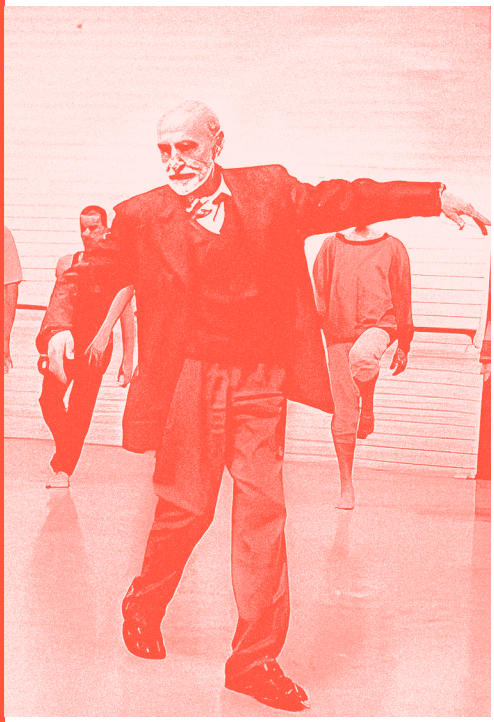
The period of so-called transformation or transition meant both enrichment and dispossession, new doors were opened while some ideals, memories and cultural experiences faded away. I guess, dear Comrade, it is a natural flow of events when the empire takes over the land of the conquered peoples. Though we were not conquered, we broke down those doors, we pushed the wall, we sent our corrupted leaders away. If socialist dancing were to train people in the radical readiness for transformation and enabling of yet another future, its teachings and resonances were present at the moment of history being overturned. So, how were these past and future lost? How did we get stuck in the non--contemporaneity and belatedness?

"What still divides Europe today, what cuts it in two different parts in spite of the ongoing unification, namely its communist past, cannot be remembered by Europe itself."

(Boris Buden, *Transition to Nowhere: Art in History After* 1989)

Buden claims that not only is there a misunderstanding (a historic manipulation?) when it comes to the political agency of the communist nations. The big difficulty lies in Europe's (and so called West's) inability to remember communism at all, to remember it as our shared history and for what it was beyond the regime it produced – a concept of universal emancipation. The infantilization of the postcommunist people served the reification of capitalist self-righteousness and it allowed the world to forget about the grabbings, unfreedoms and transgressions enacted by the capitalist countries throughout and beyond the Cold War. That is precisely why we must remember, we must continuously invoke and reinvent those pasts that once were enabling the radical future dreams. As I am writing this letter to you, dear Comrade, another war is ongoing in Europe, postcommunist nations are struggling for self-determination and inclusion in the European democratic horizon, their histories float to the surface of historic oblivion, they demand to be heard and acknowledged. It makes me hopeful that not only weapons are used in those confrontations but there is also dancing occurring on the streets, dancing that announces the fall of the empire, the new beginning that we will one day celebrate in common.

Until then it is our job to continue the work of the past generations, to walk with our ancestors and descendants, to learn from the past and do better. To say it again and again: to do a labor of historicizing is to perform a political act, to do a labor of historicizing dance is to perform a political act, to do a labor of historicizing dance of the postcommunist nations is to perform a political act. Dancing is our comrade on the way towards the future, dance brings us back from the loneliness of disembodied monads floating in the pool of contemporary exhaustion and hopelessness. Dance is a way in which a free spirit comes to inhabit a freed body (Duncan). See you on the dancefloor.



P.S. I am including a photograph of Patricio Bunster from the family album, which was sent to me by his niece Paula Ortiz Bunster. The contact and permission for publication was possible thanks to Madeleine Jo Hurtado whom I was lucky to have met in Chile, and who turned out to have been a friend of Mr. Bunster and his family. Cheers to the transnational arts community and to the artists' families.