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Dance, Sound, Word: The “Hundred-Jointed Body” in Zurich Dada Performance

Catherine Damman

It is well known that choreographer and dance theorist Rudolf von Laban attended several Zurich Dada evenings with his students, several of whom—including Sophie Taeuber and Suzanne Perrottet—danced on Dada stages, often alongside the recitation of Hugo Ball’s *Lautgedichte* (sound poems). Yet scholarly conceptions of Laban’s choreographic work and Zurich Dada performance have remained seemingly irreconcilable. Charting the interanimation of bodily movement and oral declamation, this article shows how the interplay of dance, sound, and word was central to the work of both groups. Connecting them, I argue, was the dissemination of Wilhelm Wundt’s theories of nervous transformation, which have been linked to Ball’s sound poems and which Perrottet, after studying under Émile Jacques-Dalcroze, shared with Laban and others at his school in Monte Verità. Attention to the wider *Lebensreform* (life reform) context of specific performance techniques also necessitates, as the article aims to show, a reevaluation of the historical avant-garde project as one aimed at training perceptual faculties. While avant-garde historiography has overwhelmingly centered artistic strategies such as photomontage and the extension of its shock-effects into the revolutionary potential of film, an acute consideration of dance sheds light on the ways that such tactics were aimed not only unidirectionally at the spectator but also back at the artists themselves.

Keywords: Dada, expressive dance, sound poetry, Cabaret Voltaire, Galerie Dada, Hugo Ball, Rudolf von Laban, Suzanne Perrottet, Sophie Taeuber, Wilhelm Wundt

TO STIMULATE THE DANCER’S BODY

March 29, 1917 was the opening celebration. The venue was the Galerie Dada, located at Bahnhofstrasse 19 in Zurich. Helmed by Hugo Ball and Tristan Tzara, the venture was an outgrowth of the Cabaret Voltaire, hosting an expatriate community of artists assembled under the name Dada. Listed first in the opening program were “abstract dances” by Sophie Taeuber, to be performed alongside poems by Ball, in masks by Hans Arp (see p. 351). In a retrospective account, Ball would later describe Taeuber’s dance to his poetry thus:

Abstract dances: a gong beat is enough to stimulate the dancer's body to make the most fantastic movements. The dance has become an end in itself. The nervous system exhausts all the vibrations of the sound, and perhaps all the hidden emotion of the gong beater too, and turns them into an image. Here, in this special case, a poetic sequence of sounds was enough to make each of the individual word particles produce the strangest visible effect on the hundred-jointed body of the dancer. From *Gesang der Flugfische und Seepferdchen* (Song of the Seahorses and Flying Fish) there came a dance full of flashes and edges, full of dazzling light and penetrating intensity.¹

Ball's dynamic account of Taeuber dancing is one of the most oft-repeated quotations in the literature on Dada performance. The anecdote's popularity is no doubt due to the distance it implies from the rarified air of classical dance forms, with their emphasis on precision, technique, and graceful execution. Indeed, Ball's narration brings to life the dance's modernity, conjuring the din of a thumping gong and the movement itself jagged, liberated, and fierce.

By describing Taeuber's dance as "an end in itself," Ball echoes the characterization of modern dance as *Tanz an sich* (dance in itself), a phrase that emphasized the physical movements' purported autonomy from literature and music.² This new dance was no longer beholden to the narratives of story ballets nor to the dictates of a composer. Further deploying the rhetoric of modern dance at the beginning of the twentieth century, Ball deems Taeuber's movements to be "abstract dances." Then, as now, "abstraction" is a vexed term when applied to movement, given the human body's obdurate representational nature; nonetheless, the term no doubt was useful in part for its strong connotations of the visual, linking dance activities to the advanced plastic arts.³ Ball was not wrong to frame Taeuber's performance through the vocabulary of new dance forms, given that Taeuber was actively studying with Rudolf von Laban, one of the most influential choreographers and dance teachers of the period.⁴

However, Ball's words betray a crucial—but relatively unremarked upon—ambivalence. Despite framing the dance as "an end in itself" and "abstract," Ball attributes

¹Hugo Ball, *Flight Out of Time: A Dada Diary*, ed. John Elderfield, trans. Ann Raimés (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1996), 102. Originally published as Hugo Ball, *Die Flucht aus der Zeit* (Munich and Leipzig: Duncker & Humblot, 1927).

²The earliest major primary text is Hans Brandenburg, *Der moderne Tanz* (Munich: Georg Müller, 1913). For an overview of the efflorescence of German-language dance writing and criticism in the period, see Karl Toepfer, "Dance Criticism," in *Empire of Ecstasy: Nudity and Movement in German Body Culture, 1910–1935* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 334–357.

³For a discussion of dance and abstraction, particularly as it relates to contemporary revisionist art history and exhibitions, see Juliet Bellow and Nell Andrew, "Inventing Abstraction? Modernist Dance in Europe," in *The Modernist World*, ed. Allana Lindgren and Stephen Ross (London: Routledge, 2015), 329–338.

⁴Taeuber saw Laban's dancers perform in Munich as early as 1911. Later, she took courses with Laban at Monte Verità and at his school in Zurich (during the Cabaret Voltaire period and while she was teaching at the Zurich School of Arts and Crafts). See Roswitha Mair, *Handwerk und Avantgarde: Das Leben der Künstlerin Sophie Taeuber-Arp* (Berlin: Parthas Verlag, 2013).

Taeuber's "fantastic movements" to the stimulation of the gong beats, implying that those sounds and the "word particles," in fact, *caused* the movements. The latter assertion is reinforced syntactically at the end of Ball's description, wherein he states, "from [the poem] there came a dance . . ."—yet another suggestion that the sounds and words engendered the dance. How to reconcile Ball's self-contradictory appraisal of the performance? In fact, both this question and its answer can be extrapolated into consideration of a larger aporia in avant-garde historiography, which the present article seeks to address: Though the interactions and collaborations between modern dancers such as Laban and Zurich Dada are well known, any adequate understanding of an intellectual resonance between the two groups' creative output has thus far remained elusive.

In order to shed light on these largely unexplored connections, my discussion proceeds by first reflecting briefly on dance's relative marginalization in Dada scholarship. I then turn to Ball's *Lautgedichte* (sound poems), which, as I argue, build on an understanding of language as bodily movement on levels both analogical and operational. Departing from the observation that Ball's thinking in this regard bears the traces of a scientific discourse inaugurated by the physiological psychologist Wilhelm Wundt, I draw a link to Laban's pedagogy, which was even more explicitly informed by Wundt's theories of nervous transformation.⁵ Wundt's influence on Laban's techniques was mediated by Suzanne Perrottet, who had come into contact with Wundtian ideas through her study with the Swiss music theorist and pedagogue Émile Jacques-Dalcroze.⁶ Emphasizing the *Lebensreform* (life reform) context of Laban's school, I show how the interplay of dance, sound, and word was central to both Laban's teaching and Zurich Dada performance; the peculiar alchemy of these three elements, I argue, provides a crucial connective tissue between the two artistic groups.

The confluence of these experimental tactics—as twinned derivatives of the period's scientific discourse—necessitate an expanded consideration of the historical avant-garde project as one aimed at training perceptual faculties. In this regard, previous avant-garde historiography has overwhelmingly focused on artistic strategies such as photomontage and the extension of its shock-effects into the revolutionary potential of film. An acute consideration of dance, by contrast, sheds light on the ways in which Dada performance was aimed not only at the perceptual faculties of the spectator but also at the bodies of the artists themselves. I argue that the concept of the body of Zurich Dada performance was therefore an emphatically permeable one, best understood in relation to a larger history of pedagogy and performance.

⁵Laban explicitly discusses Wundt in his later treatise, *Die Welt des Tänzers, fünf Gedankenreigen* (Stuttgart: Seifert, 1920), 253. This reference is noted in Evelyn Dörr and Lori Lantz, "Rudolf von Laban: The 'Founding Father' of Expressionist Dance," *Dance Chronicle* 26, no. 1 (2003): 2, note 3. See also Evelyn Dörr, *Rudolf von Laban: Dancer of the Crystal* (Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2008).

⁶See Peter Michael Mowris, *Nerve Languages: The Critical Response to the Physiological Psychology of Wilhelm Wundt by Dada and Surrealism*, PhD Dissertation, University of Texas at Austin, 2010. Mowris also argues for Wundt's influence on a number of figures, including those that take the focus of the present essay. However, our analyses diverge in that I consider these connections in light of both Dada historiography and theorizations of the avant-garde project to train sensory perception.

Though the two groups have heretofore seemed conceptually irreconcilable, the visits to the Cabaret Voltaire made by Rudolf von Laban and his students are well documented in the history of Zurich Dada. Laban attended the Cabaret repeatedly with a number of female students, including Maya Chruszcz, Perrottet, Jeanne Rigaud, Taeuber, Maria Vanselow, Kläre Walther, Mary Wigman, and Katja Wulff.⁷ Several of these dancers performed on Dada stages, yet there has been a surprising lack of comprehensive scholarship on this topic, no doubt due in part to a gendered division between linguistic performance and dance that was established by first-hand accounts of Dada and perpetuated in later academic literature. Exemplary is Hans Richter's description of the Dada artists' relationship to Laban and his dancers: "Laban's ballet school was our celestial headquarters . . . [but] we did not like to pitch the tents of Laban (or anything else) in these lovely pastures for too long a time."⁸ Portrayed as romantic and erotic interests—sometimes coded as muse, other times as distraction—dancers such as Perrottet and Taeuber have been overwhelmingly marginalized from scholarly accounts alongside their artistic contributions.⁹ By contrast, in the account that follows, both Perrottet and Taeuber emerge as pivotal figures; Perrottet for her role in mediating the work of Dalcroze and Laban, and Taeuber for the varied and contradictory reactions she galvanized with her dancing.

Even as scholars begin to rectify the gendered imbalance of Dada historiography, a central conflict remains between scholarly conceptions of Laban's choreographic work and that of Dada performance. Laban's role in cultivating a larger culture of *Ausdruckstanz* (expressive dance) was bound up in what Dianne S. Howe has called "the aesthetics of individualism," its practitioners seeking "a new way to move which was capable of expressing the individual statement in the form of a free artistic composition."¹⁰ Dada, by contrast, is understood to have mounted an assault on precisely that model of personal interiority and its outward manifestation, preferring both chance to intentionality and nonsense to meaning. Moreover,

⁷Ball, *Flight Out of Time*, 70. See *Emmy Hennings Dada*, ed. Christa Baumberger and Nicola Behrmann (Zurich: Scheidegger & Spiess, 2015) for more information on these dancers.

⁸Hans Richter, *Dada: Art and Anti-Art* [1964], trans. David Britt (London: Thames and Hudson, 1997), 69. See also Ruth Hemus, "Sex and the Cabaret: Dada's Dancer's," *Nordlit* 21, Special Issue "The Avant-Garde and the Other" (2007): 91–101. At Monte Verità, Laban cultivated a powerful air of mystique and was erotically entangled with many of his students. See Toepfer, "Rudolf von Laban," in *Empire of Ecstasy*, 99–107.

⁹The earliest English-language text on this topic is Naima Prevots, "Zurich Dada and Dance: Formative Ferment," *Dance Research Journal* 17, no. 1 (Spring/Summer 1985): 3–8. The contribution of women artists to Dada has, in more recent years, been subject to reappraisal by feminist scholars. See Renée Riese Hubert, "Zurich Dada and Its Artist Couples," in *Women in Dada*, ed. Naomi Sawelson-Gorse (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), 516–545; Jill Fell, "Sophie Taeuber: The Masked Dancer," *Forum for Modern Language Studies* 35, no. 3 (1999): 270–285; and Ruth Hemus, "Taeuber as Dada Body: The Subversion of Dance," in *Dada's Women* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2009), 63–70.

¹⁰Dianne S. Howe, *Individuality and Expression: The Aesthetics of the New German Dance, 1908–1936* (New York: Peter Lang, 1996). See also Isa Partsch-Bergsohn and Harold Bergsohn, *The Makers of Modern Dance in Germany: Rudolph von Laban, Mary Wigman, Kurt Jooss* (Hightstown, NJ: Princeton Book Co., 2003), and Mark Franko, "The Politics of Expression," in *Dancing Modernism: Performing Politics* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1995), ix–xiv.

Laban's desire to elevate dance in the ranks of the fine arts is, at the surface, diametrically opposed to Dada's "anti-art" attack on the privileged status of the art object.¹¹

Above all else, it is perhaps Laban's system of dance notation, for which he is best known, that has seemed most in conflict with the principles of Zurich Dada. First conceived under the name of Kinetography Laban and today known colloquially as Labanotation, the system's 1,421 hieroglyphic symbols faithfully record the part of the body, duration, direction, and dynamic quality or velocity of the movement. Laban's faith in writing—in its capacity for transmitting meaning with clarity, precision, and authority—is putatively antithetical to Zurich Dada's outright rejection of conventional language, poetry, and literature. Though it was not codified until his presentation at the 1928 Essen Dance Congress, Laban began to develop his notation system at Monte Verità with the aid of Wigman, who recounts, "Every movement had to be done over and over again until it was controlled and could be analyzed, transposed, and transformed into an adequate symbol."¹² Ball's interest in "reinventing language" was likewise the impetus for his *Lautgedichte*, which he first presented on June 23, 1916.¹³ However, as opposed to communicative efficacy, Ball's sound poetry gives us guttural emanations, stuttering utterances, syllabic repetition, and animalistic yawp.¹⁴

ARTICULATION: SOUND AND MOVEMENT

Despite these seeming incompatibilities, Ball's poetry is, in fact, the precise location to begin a discussion of how the entanglement of corporeal action and language forms a decisive point of intersection between Zurich Dada and dance. After all, Judith Butler reminds us that "speaking is itself a bodily act," a claim Ball seems to have understood.¹⁵ In his oft-cited "Dadaist Manifesto," presented at the Zunfthaus zur Waag on July 14, 1916, Ball emphasizes language's physical characteristics by drawing the following analogy:

¹¹Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. Michael Shaw (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984). See also Stephen Foster, "Disaster and the Habits of Culture," in *Dada and the Coordinates of Cultural Politics*, ed. Stephen Foster (New York: G.K. Hall, 1996), 1–6. The important 2005 exhibition at the National Gallery of Art also emphasized Dada's relationship to modernity, collective production, and public speech; see *Dada: Zurich, Berlin, Hannover, Cologne, New York, Paris*, ed. Leah Dickerman (Washington, DC: National Gallery of Art/D.A.P., 2005).

¹²Mary Wigman, "My Teacher Laban," in *What Is Dance?*, ed. Marshall Cohen and Roger Copeland (New York: Oxford University Press, 1983), 303.

¹³Ball, *Flight Out of Time*, 25. Despite his proclamation of invention, Ball's sound poetry was, in fact, based in other avant-garde precedents, such as Vasily Kandinsky's *Klänge* (Sounds; 1912) and Futurist Filippo Tommaso Marinetti's "Parole in libertà" (Words in Freedom; 1912), both of which were performed or displayed at the Cabaret Voltaire.

¹⁴With regard to Dada and notation, it should be mentioned that Tzara's simultaneous poems were written and scored for performers, most famously his "L'Amiral cherche une maison à louer," published in *Cabaret Voltaire* (1916): 6–7 (see, in this context, the essay by Emily Hage in the present issue). Trevor Stark has also uncovered evidence of dance notation by Wulff and Taeuber (although not in Laban's final system of Kinetography Laban). Trevor Stark, "Simultaneity and Totality: Tristan Tzara's Simultaneous Poem Scores" (presentation, College Art Association, Washington, DC, February 4, 2016).

¹⁵Judith Butler, *Excitable Speech: A Politics of the Performative* (London: Routledge, 1997), 10.

It will serve to show how articulated language comes into being. I let the vowels fool around. I let the vowels quite simply occur, as a cat miaows ... Words emerge, shoulders of words, legs, arms, hands of words. Au, oi, uh. One shouldn't let too many words out.¹⁶

Ball here rhetorically endows words with their own kind of physical agency: they “fool around,” occur of their own volition, act as sprouting appendages, and escape. Here words are mischievously sensual—even promiscuous—with a dangerous quality that, as Ball cautions, should be strictly rationed and controlled. Moreover, the words Ball describes are partitioned into syllabic units analogized as individual parts of the body (shoulders, legs, arms, and hands).

Undoubtedly, Ball's writing is somewhat playful. Nonetheless, he elucidates, quite seriously, the process by which he understood “articulated language” to come into being. The operation begins with syllabic enunciations of vowel sounds (“au, oi, uh”), which accrete and reproduce, their compounds resulting in words that signify. Ball's analogy is significant in light of Tobias Wilke's recent argument for the structural affinities between the Dadaist project of sound poetry and the diffusion of ideas attributed to Wilhelm Wundt, the late nineteenth-century founder of modern physiological psychology, who conceived of spoken language *as* movement.¹⁷ Wundt's notion of speech as a bodily action was predicated on a notion of articulation as a distinctly physiological act occurring between the lips, larynx, vocal cords, and tongue, recasting spoken language and the “language” of bodily gestures as one and the same. Like Ball's analogy, Wundt's formulation tracks the evolution of articulate speech as it grows from the repetition of inarticulate sounds and syllabic units.¹⁸

Though Ball does not refer to Wundt directly, his poetry resonates with the broad influence of Wundt's ideas, which would also be adopted by Émile Jacques Dalcroze. Unlike Ball, Dalcroze was interested not in poetic reflection, but rather in employing Wundt's ideas in service of bodily training. Dalcroze's method, which he called “eurhythmics,” taught students a heightened sensitivity to rhythm via a series of patterned motions in particular sequences,

¹⁶Hugo Ball, “Dada Manifesto, Zurich, July 14, 1916,” in *Flight Out of Time*, 221. I here use a translation by Christopher Middleton, based on the transcription of Ball's original manuscript by his stepdaughter, Annemarie Schütt-Hennings (for a discussion of the manifesto's publication history, see the essay by Tobias Wilke in the present issue). It is Middleton's translation that provides the slightly sexualized English-language connotation of “fool around.”

¹⁷Tobias Wilke, “Da-Da: ‘Articulatory Gestures’ and the Emergence of Sound Poetry,” *MLN* 128, no. 3 (April 2013): 641 and 644. Notably, scholars have connected Wundt's work and influence to other German intellectual figures, including the empathy theories of Wilhelm Worringer, a figure central to art historical understandings of abstraction. Wilhelm Worringer, *Abstraction and Empathy: A Contribution to the Psychology of Style*, trans. Michael Bullock (New York: International Universities Press, 1953).

¹⁸Wilke, “Da-da,” 665. Crucially, Wilke argues that Dada sound poetry was not conceived as an “actual” return to “a primary, pre-linguistic stage” but, rather, a later “poetic reflection” on this process. See also Reinhart Meyer-Kalkus, *Stimme und Sprechkünste im 20. Jahrhundert* (Berlin: Akademie Verlag, 2001) for another analysis connecting Ball and Wundt.

which drew on Wundtian theories of nervous transformation.¹⁹ Dalcroze's approach was characterized by the cultivation of three specific techniques: *rythmique* (rhythmic body movement), *solfège* (ear training), and *improvisation* (primarily performed on the piano).²⁰ Beginning by listening to the heartbeat, students advanced to drums and the piano, moving from simple formulations to the increasingly complex. As Karl Toepfer observes, these exercises often involved the isolation and then recombination of body parts, as "[students] moved only the head; they moved only the left hand and the head; they moved the left hand in 4/4 while the right hand moved in 3/8 [...] rhythmic mastery nearly always implied a capacity to express multiple rhythms within the body simultaneously."²¹ The desired cumulative effect was to train the body—specifically, to methodically craft a body that was "highly refined and detailed in its immediate response to every element of music."²²

While the entire trajectory of Dalcroze's eurhythmics as it developed over the first half of the twentieth century is beyond the scope of the present text, it is germane that Dalcroze's pedagogy was firmly situated within the *Lebensreform* movement. Therefore, when Perrottet and Wigman—both important students of Dalcroze and accredited teachers of his method—decamped to study with Laban in Ascona beginning in 1913, they found themselves in a familiar environment.²³ Laban's school was located on the hills of Monte Verità, a free-spirited community founded by Ida Hofmann and Henri Oedenkoven in the picturesque setting near the Lago Maggiore. Aptly situated in a serene landscape, the Monte Verità colony was committed to larger *Lebensreform* principles of rescuing the damaged human body from modernity via a healthful attitude, and it became a haven for artists and intellectuals (including Tristan Tzara, Ball and Emmy Hennings as well as Taeuber and Hans Arp).²⁴

Although the dance work undertaken by Laban, Wigman, and others was advocated in terms of the aforementioned *Tanz an sich*, an "absolute" dance free from the governing constraints of music and rhythm, Laban's pedagogical techniques maintained an active interest in the relationship between movement and sound that is often overlooked. At Monte Verità, Laban personally taught two types of courses: movement classes, as to be expected, but also a series of "verbal" classes. Most important of these were Laban's *Freitanz* (free dance) exer-

¹⁹Wilhelm Wundt, *Völkerpsychologie: Eine Untersuchung der Entwicklungsgesetze von Sprache, Mythos und Sitte*, vol. 1, *Die Sprache* (Leipzig: Engelmann, 1911). Though contemporary with—and not entirely dissimilar from—Rudolf Steiner's concept of "Eurythmy," Dalcroze's Eurhythmics are nonetheless distinct from Steiner's techniques. See Émile Jacques-Dalcroze, *The Eurhythmics of Émile Jacques-Dalcroze* (Boston: Small Maynard & Company, 1915).

²⁰Irwin Spector, *Rhythm and Life: The Work of Émile Jacques-Dalcroze* (Stuyvesant, NY: Pendragon Press, 1990).

²¹Toepfer, "Figure One," in *Empire of Ecstasy*, 18.

²²Jo Alice Leeds, "Romanticism, the Avant-Garde, and the Early Modern Innovators in Arts Education," *Journal of Aesthetic Education* 19, no. 3 (Autumn 1985): 81. Dalcroze's School for Eurhythmic Instruction was founded in Hellerau, Germany in 1910; in 1914 he moved his school to Geneva, Switzerland.

²³Perrottet was, for a time, Dalcroze's chief assistant. For a discussion of Dalcroze's impact on Wigman, see Selma Odom, "Wigman at Hellerau," *Ballet Review* 14, no. 2 (Summer 1986): 46–47.

²⁴Martin Green, *Mountain of Truth: The Counterculture Begins, Ascona: 1900–1920* (Hanover: University Press of New England, 1986). See also Harald Szeemann, *Monte Verità: Berg der Wahrheit* (Milan: Electra Editrice, 1978).

cises, in which students improvised with both sounds and movements. One of these classes took on a particular form titled *Tanz-Ton-Wort* (dance-sound-word). These loosely structured classes involved instructor-led exercises that were open to individual interpretation by the students.

One such experiment involved shaking the body vigorously, and Perrottet described it thus: “[E]very limb on its own, the hand, the elbow, the upper arm, the foot, the toes, and then suddenly tensing up [. . .] you used every articulation just as it was: the turning articulation, the bending articulation.”²⁵ Perrottet’s language here elucidates two key points: that discrete parts of the body were parceled and distinctly named, and that the term “articulation” was used to identify individual movements, suggesting again the existence of a shared vocabulary for both physical movements and the process of vocal expression. Her phrasing thus recalls Ball’s *Lautgedichte*, as *Artikulieren* (articulation), and weds linguistic enunciation to a sense of the body’s “jointedness”—the wielding of its constituent parts.

More advanced courses involved words and simple sentences, and some lessons grew to include improvised singing. Sometimes, “Laban made up the words to which we moved,” or the students made use of “phrases, small poems that [they] composed together,” suggesting a clear genealogy back to the work of Dalcroze.²⁶ These experiments occurred in largely improvisatory gatherings, held in darkness. As Perrottet paraphrases it, Laban directed them: “[N]ow we will choose a word, and pass it back and forth among ourselves and make it into a musical theme.”²⁷ Perrottet’s influence—she was a trained musician and composer—even led Laban to experiment in musical composition, a fact that evidences Laban’s own interest in the possibilities of sound, not just as subsidiary accompaniment to dance movements but rather as artistically significant in its own right. In fact, Perrottet played Laban’s atonal compositions at the Galerie Dada on April 28, 1917.²⁸

FROM PUPPET TO PUPIL

Only a month prior to the presentation of Laban’s atonal compositions, Taeuber graced the Galerie Dada stages with her memorable dance to Ball’s poems. Both original and striking, her performance compelled numerous figures to record their thoughts and reactions, often years later, and many of them in direct conflict with one another. Though Ball’s later-published diary entry recalling her performance is perhaps best known, another related essay of his, “Über Okkultismus, Hieratik und andere seltsam schöne Dinge” (On the Occult, the Hieratic, and Other Strangely Beautiful Things) appeared in the *Berner Intelligenzblatt* on November 15, 1917, just a few months after he departed from the Zurich Dada group. Celebrating the talent of three female dancers, Ball discusses Wigman and the Russian dancer

²⁵Suzanne Perrottet, *Die Befreiung des Körpers: Erinnerungen*, ed. Giorgio J. Wolfensberger and Margarete Berg (Wädenswil: Nimbus, 2014), 83.

²⁶*Ibid.*, 84. Without a record of these improvised “small poems,” it is impossible to discern how—if at all—they might be compared to Dada poetry.

²⁷*Ibid.*

²⁸Ball, *Flight Out of Time*, 110.

Raya Belenson before sharing a version of his notes on Taeuber, which I reproduce here in full:

Sophie Taeuber is entirely different again. With her, in the place of tradition steps the light of the sun, the miracle. She is full of invention, caprice, the bizarre. In a private Zurich gallery she danced the “Song of the Flying Fish and Sea-Horses,” an onomatopoeic series of sounds. It was a dance full of spikes and fish-bones, full of flickering sun and gloss and of cutting sharpness. The lines shattered at her body. Every gesture is ordered in a hundred parts, sharp, light, pointed. The folly of perspective, of illumination, the atmosphere becomes here, for a hypersensitive nervous system, an occasion for drollery, for an ironic quip. Her dance formations are full of the desire to fantasize, grotesque and enchanted. Her body is girlishly clever and enriches the world with every new dance that she allows to happen.²⁹

Slightly altered in the later diary version, Ball’s narrative in the *Berner Intelligenzblatt* is read by Jill Fell as one of mechanistic effect, wherein the gong’s vibrations “reverberated throughout [Taeuber’s] body and activated it like a clockwork toy.” Emphasizing the music’s violent impact, she asserts that “Ball implie[d] that [Taeuber] made herself into a puppet, a mechanical object at the mercy of the gong-beater and the voice of the poet.”³⁰ Accurately capturing the sense of Taeuber’s movement as in dialogue with the words and sounds, Fell’s analysis builds on a dominant strain of avant-garde scholarship that positions the activities at the Cabaret Voltaire and the Galerie Dada as a response to wartime trauma. Exemplary in this regard is Hal Foster’s reading of Ball’s “magical bishop” performance as that of a “traumatic mime,” wherein mimetic adaptation allows the Dadaist to assume and exaggerate the disastrous conditions of modernity.³¹

Alternatively, Hans Arp would later recall Taeuber’s dancing body not as a mechanical object at the mercy of some external force but rather as an aggressive force itself, describing “the piercing glare” and “the startle and the bite.”³² Thirty years later, Marcel Janco still vividly remembered Taeuber’s “jerky syncopated expression,” describing her movements as

²⁹Hugo Ball, “Über Okkultismus, Hieratik und andere seltsam schöne Dinge,” *Berner Intelligenzblatt*, no. 314 (November 15, 1917): 2. The text was later reprinted in Hugo Ball, *Der Künstler und die Zeitkrankheit: Ausgewählte Schriften*, ed. Hans Burkhard Schlichting (Frankfurt/Main: Suhrkamp, 1984), 54–57. Debbie Lewer has recently translated the text as “On Occultism, the Hieratic, and Other Strangely Beautiful Things,” *Art in Translation* 5, no. 3 (Summer 2013): 403–408.

³⁰Fell, “The Masked Dada Dancer,” 278. Fell’s text connects Taeuber’s performances to her later work in marionettes.

³¹Hal Foster, “Dada Mime,” *October* 105 (Summer 2003): 169 and 175. The famed performance to which Foster refers took place on June 23, 1916. See Ball, *Flight Out of Time*, 70–71. For another example of this strain of scholarship, see also Brigid Doherty’s concept of traumaphilia in “See: ‘We Are All Neurasthenics!’ or, The Trauma of Dada Montage,” *Critical Inquiry* 24, no. 1 (Autumn 1997): 82–132.

³²Hans Arp, “Sophie tanzte,” *Spirale* 1 (Bern, 1954), quoted in Erica Kessler, “Sophie danse,” trans. André Gunthert, in *Sophie Taeuber* (Paris: Musée d’Art Modern de la Ville de Paris, 1989), 45.

“exactly like the chords of good jazz or the restrained and dignified sadness of American blues.”³³ Janco’s allusion to new musical styles emphasized the modernity of Taeuber’s dance by dint of association. In contrast to Janco’s characterization of the dance as “jerky,” and as “ke[pt] clear of all contrived elegance,” Hennings remembered Taeuber as having natural beauty and grace, writing, “the ineffable softness of her movements allowed one to forget that her feet even touched the ground.”³⁴ In Hennings’s recollection, Taeuber’s dancing was akin to elements from nature: birds, flowers, stars, all of which seemed to be harmonious. More recently, Andrew has argued that Taeuber’s artistic practice was itself a negotiation of Dada fragmentation and a “supple body made whole through expressive movement.”³⁵ The impression of unity Andrew describes is here a formal one, referring to the quality of movement rather than a change in the performer’s physical or spiritual well-being.

The sense of actually *altering* the performer’s physical body was perhaps latent in the two versions of Ball’s description, which, invoking both the phenomena of vibrations and the nervous system, employ physiological language that echoes Wundt’s project without upholding its scientific rigor or elaborating on its exact operation. Ball’s allusion to the effect of vibrations on the nervous system can here be productively contrasted to Tzara’s description of Taeuber dancing, published in the first issue of his journal *Dada* in July 1917, alongside mentions of Wigman, Perrottet, Wulff, and others. Tzara also identifies vibration as a key element, albeit in a more pathological sense, writing: “delirious bizarreness in the spider of the hand vibrates rhythm rapidly ascending to the paroxysm of a beautiful capricious mocking dementia.”³⁶ For Tzara, Taeuber’s dance was creaturely, even disordered. In fact, Tzara’s account bears closest resemblance to the convergence of primitivism and nervous pathology traced by Rae Beth Gordon in the gestural displays of café-concerts and cabarets of *fin de siècle* France. In that context, appropriated movements from hysterics, epileptics, and African or African-American dancers were conflated and contributed to a “vernacular modernity” that, as Gordon argues, precedes avant-garde interest in an “aesthetic of disorder.”³⁷

³³Marcel Janco, “Creative Dada” (1957), in *DADA: Monograph of a Movement*, ed. Willy Verkauf, Marcel Janco, and Hans Bolliger (London: Academy Editions/New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1961), 23.

³⁴Emmy Hennings, “Zur Erinnerung an Sophie Taeuber-Arp,” in *Emmy Hennings Dada*, 116. Translation mine.

³⁵Nell Andrew, “Dada Dance: Sophie Taeuber’s Visceral Abstraction,” *Art Journal* 73, no. 1 (Spring 2014): 27–29.

³⁶“Notes,” *Dada* no. 1 (July 1917): 16. Reprinted in *Dada: Zurich, Paris, 1916–1922*, ed. Michel Giroud (Paris: Editions Jean Michel Place, 1981), 112. For online access to the journal *Dada*, see <http://sdr.lib.uiowa.edu/dada/dada/1/pages/016.htm>.

³⁷Rae Beth Gordon, *Dances with Darwin, 1875–1910: Vernacular Modernity in France* (Farnham: Ashgate, 2009), 9. The *chants nègres* and the “negro dances” performed at both the Cabaret Voltaire and the Galerie Dada provide another point of connection between the poems and dances of Zurich Dada, this time through a troubling primitivism. Ball recalls “rehearsing a new dance with five Laban-ladies as Negresses,” in April 1917 for the second soirée at the Galerie Dada. Ball, *Flight Out of Time*, 104. As Whitney Chadwick and others have argued, the “negro masks” and “African dances” employed on Dada stages conflated the otherness of femininity to the otherness of the African continent, offering a seductive world freed from Western social mores and associated with “authentic” visceral experience.

Is it possible to conceive Taeuber's dancing as both the spectacularization of nervous pathology *and* the adoption of a disciplined mode of bodily training—specifically, one aimed at physical and spiritual amelioration—such as Laban's? Indeed, Taeuber's performance necessitates thinking through such contradictions, contextualized by the fact that her dance was received quite differently and with changing connotations over the years.³⁸ Whether we consider Taeuber's dancing in terms of traumatic dehumanization as a form of defense, the formal restoration of bodily integrity, or through a freedom ascribed to the body of a "primitive" or pathological other, her performance practices must, I argue, be situated in the context of Wundtian theories of nervous transformation, traced from the techniques of Dalcroze, Perrottet, and Laban to the experiments on Dada stages and fully contextualized as related to the wider *Lebensreform* movement.

By 1917, Ball seemed to fully subscribe to the possibilities of transformation through sensorial training; the bulk of his *Berner Intelligenzblatt* article is dedicated to his endorsement of Laban's school and teaching. In his article, Ball declares Laban's teachings to be central to cultural transformation:

With its education of the personality, the school encompasses the whole field of eurhythmia. This is no longer merely a matter of technique, but of the entire artistic pedagogy, of which the culture of expression [*Ausdruckskultur*], in dance, sound, and word is only the practical part. Alongside the nurturing of his spiritual and physical talents, the pupil should also be given the opportunity to comprehend the connections of his art with the rhythmic and cultural whole.³⁹

Crucially, Ball situates these teachings as encompassing the "field of eurhythmia," Dalcroze's aforementioned pedagogy. Moreover, Ball names specifically "dance, sound, and word," the three interconnected elements of Laban's *Freitanz* classes. Ball's enthusiasm was likely accelerated by his experience at the "Congrès Coopératif Anational de la Confrérie des Illuminés Hermétiques," an event organized by Laban, Wigman, and the esoteric Carl Albert Theodor Reuß in Ascona (August 15–25, 1917). In Ball's blustering proclamation, Laban's techniques are endowed with the revolutionary potential to "[bestow] on the pupil moral stability and values on which he can base his later life."⁴⁰

TRAINING PERCEPTION

Although perceptual training has long been part of conceptualizing both Dada and the historical avant-garde writ large, it has primarily been theorized through the notion of "shock," a ref-

Whitney Chadwick, "Fetishizing Fashion/Fetishizing Culture: Man Ray's *Noire et Blanche*," *Oxford Art Journal* 18 (1995): 3–17.

³⁸Ball's two recollections were published in 1917 and 1927, respectively; Tzara's in 1917; Hennings's in 1948; Arp's in 1954; and Janco's in 1957.

³⁹Ball, "On Occultism," 406. Notably, the conference was the annual congress of the group *Ordo Templi Orientis*.

⁴⁰*Ibid.*

erence to Walter Benjamin's reading of the avant-garde project as one aimed at the "increase of somatic functionality."⁴¹ To scholars of the period, what Benjamin called the "calculated training of the sensorial facilities" initiated by the avant-garde, on the one hand, and contemporaneous *Lebensreform* techniques, on the other hand, may still seem irreconcilable. Yet Ball's writing establishes that the exchange between dance, sound, and word was as constitutive of Dada performance as it was to the *Freitanz* exercises at Laban's school. Moreover, these convergences together suggest a radical understanding of the body not as fragmented but rather as permeable, defined by its capacity to both shape and be shaped from the outside. Taeuber's dance had "penetrating intensity," a distinctly masculine metaphor (cf. penetration) with violent connotations that built on the militaristic undertones of the term "avant-garde."⁴² However, Taeuber's was also emphatically an *affected* body, susceptible to the beats of a gong and the impact of word particles. As Susan Buck-Morss has identified, the notion of bodily permeability was gendered feminine—as in Nietzsche's concept of *Weibesaesthetik*—to which an impenetrable, male body was contrasted.⁴³

Miriam Bratu Hansen has argued for Benjamin's concept of innervation as relying on precisely this type of *two-way* process, a mutually constitutive transfer between inside and out. For Hansen, the "protective shield against stimuli, the precarious boundary or rind of the bodily ego," could, for Benjamin, "be imagined less as a carapace or armor than as a matrix—a porous interface between the organism and the world that would allow for a greater mobility and the circulation of psychic energies."⁴⁴ Wundt's conceptions of the nervous system—and, by extension, the experiments undertaken by Dalcroze, Perrottet, and Laban—similarly suggest the mutability of this process: vibrations that could permeate the body's distinction between interior and exterior. While the revolutionary potential of Benjaminian innervation finds its ultimate realization in the form of cinema, that *telos* may be displaced by the recognition of the ways in which dance also offers a durational spectatorial experience—one, it should be noted, predicated on the visual perception of motion

⁴¹Tobias Wilke, "Tacti(ca)lity Reclaimed: Benjamin's Medium, the Avant-Garde, and the Politics of the Senses," *Grey Room* 39 (Spring 2010): 39–55. See also Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility (Third Version)," in *Walter Benjamin: Selected Writings*, vol. 4, 1938–1940, ed. Howard Eiland and Michael Jennings (Cambridge, MA: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 2003), 251–283. See also Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, 80, wherein Bürger claims that forms such as the readymade and photomontage offered "a stimulus to change one's life."

⁴²As Wilke observes, Benjamin's sense of avant-garde sensorial training relied on militaristic metaphors: for Benjamin, "the dadaists turned the artwork into a projectile," which "jolted the viewer." Walter Benjamin, "The Work of Art in the Age of Its Technological Reproducibility [First Version]," trans. Michael W. Jennings, *Grey Room* 39 (Spring 2010): 32. Quoted in Wilke, "Tacti(ca)lity Reclaimed," 46.

⁴³Susan Buck-Morss, "Aesthetics and Anaesthetics: Walter Benjamin's Artwork Essay Reconsidered," *October* 62 (Autumn 1992): 10.

⁴⁴Miriam Bratu Hansen, "Benjamin and Cinema: Not a One-Way Street," *Critical Inquiry* 25 (Winter 1999): 306–343. Part of this material is adapted in her "Mistaking the Moon for a Ball," in Miriam Bratu Hansen, *Cinema and Experience: Siegfried Kracauer, Walter Benjamin, and Theodor W. Adorno* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2012), 132–162.

and often (although not always) in tandem with sound.⁴⁵ These shared resonances suggest that innervation was not only a media-technical category for Dada artists but also related to a wider conception of bodily practices, perhaps redefining the parameters of spectator and performer.

Therefore, the avant-garde imperative to train perception was not catalyzed only by the violence of World War I, nor was its trajectory solely technologically determined by the advent of photography and film; it rather also incorporated—at least in moments—strategies and investments that predate the former two. My point is certainly not to minimize the centrality of wartime trauma for these artists, nor is it to elide the methods of Laban and Dada into a single, indistinguishable mass; though the *Lebensreform* movement precedes the advent of World War I, its ghastly violence likely accelerated the perceived exigency of these techniques. Rather, my aim has been to augment and recontextualize the art historical notion of “shock,” which, in the light of these historical confluences, can be tempered by something more akin to habit, a practice enacted over time rather than a one-time event.⁴⁶

Moreover, accounts of Taeuber’s dancing, Dalcroze’s pedagogy, and Laban’s *Freitanz* exercises all share a peculiar tension between the freedom of movement ascribed to the body and the body’s continuous dissection. Although fragmentation has long been a key means of theorizing Dada’s formal operations, these newly uncovered resonances suggest—at least in the context of dance—that the shattered Dada body was a means of isolating its parts in order to examine and rework them anew. In the diary version of Ball’s description, Taeuber’s “hundred-jointed body” emphasizes and exaggerates the discrete units of the body to which Ball parallels “individual word particles” as equally distinct pieces. One can imagine that for him, Taeuber’s dance made manifest the aforementioned “shoulders of words, legs, arms, hands of words,” to which his *Lautgedichte* aspired. Likewise, the segregation of individual body parts was central to Dalcroze’s pedagogical aforementioned technique of *rhythmique* and is also emphasized in Perrottet’s vivid description of Laban’s *Freitanz* exercises. The tensing of individual body parts remained an important feature of Laban’s work as he began to publish in the 1920s; his method is described as involving the examination of “numerous parts of the body, from head to toe, in relation to their movement potential.”⁴⁷

Little else of Laban’s work in the 1920s and after would have been recognizable to the Dada artists. Laban’s interest in *Bewegungschöre* (movement choirs)—nascent during his time at Ascona—became a publicly performed reality in 1922 and dominated his later career. Throughout the 1920s, while Laban was writing and publishing his many treatises on dance,

⁴⁵Gabriele Brandstetter has argued that “processes of segmentation that are characteristic of film, chronophotography, and editing were also translated into the body and movement concepts of avant-garde theater and dance,” chiefly through the work of Valeska Gert, which she contrasts to that of Wigman and Kurt Jooss. See Gabriele Brandstetter, “Interruption, Intermediality, and Disjunction in the Movement Concepts of Avant-Garde Dance,” in *Poetics of Dance: Body, Image, and Space in the Historical Avant-Garde* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015), 362–384.

⁴⁶For a discussion of Benjamin and habit, see Michael Taussig, “Tactility and Distraction,” *Cultural Anthropology* 6, no. 2 (May, 1991): 147–153, adapted in Taussig, *The Nervous System* (London: Routledge, 1992), 141–148.

⁴⁷Toepfer, “Rudolf von Laban,” 103.

as well as formalizing his notation system and then proselytizing about it, his choreographic focus was on the *Bewegungschöre*, large groups of amateur dancers performing together with an aim of communal unity and social transformation. Later, these groups would be renamed *Gemeinschaftstanz* (community dance) and would be the form through which Laban contributed to the Nazi festivals organized by Joseph Goebbels until, in 1936, the party banned Laban.⁴⁸ Laban's involvement with National Socialism is no less heinous for being ambivalent, and his legacy is today fittingly fraught. Nonetheless, I am wary of the inclination to circumscribe Laban and his circle of dancers to the bad object, the unrevolutionary ground against which the heroic—if failed—avant-garde can be thrown into high relief.⁴⁹ Such positions are untenable not least because of the pernicious racism dogging Dada artists' own interest in the "primitive," as well as the revelation of Ball's troubling anti-Semitism.⁵⁰

Indeed, it is striking that the project of sensorial training believed by Benjamin and others to combat fascism may have also constituted its rise. To unearth such connections, about which the reader may rightly feel ambivalent, is also in no way to advocate for discarding these episodes from scholarly consideration. Rather, it is a reminder to remain all the more vigilant even, if not especially, when we are dealing with the avant-garde, which cannot be assumed to be unassailably progressive. Lastly, if the preceding discussion has been preoccupied with both a Foucauldian analysis of how the body is inscribed as well as what might fall under the purview of the humanities' *affective turn*, that is, asking what the body can *do* and considering the body's potential to affect and be affected, it has also insisted that these issues are inextricably tethered to questions of what and how the body signifies.⁵¹ In this regard, my aim has been to join other scholars who insist on dance's part—in the historical avant-garde and elsewhere—as decisive rather than ancillary. Dance played, at least for a brief time, a

⁴⁸Lilian Karina and Marion Kant, *Hitler's Dancers: German Modern Dance and the Third Reich*, trans. Jonathan Steinberg (New York: Berghahn Books, 2003); Terri J. Gordon, "Fascism and the Female Form: Performance Art in the Third Reich," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 11, no. 1/2 (January–April 2002): 164–200.

⁴⁹This line of thinking is exemplified in Lucia Ruprecht, "Gesture, Interruption, Vibration: Rethinking Early Twentieth-Century Gestural Theory and Practice in Walter Benjamin, Rudolf von Laban, and Mary Wigman," *Dance Research Journal* 42, no. 2 (2015): 23–42. Ruprecht contrasts Benjamin's theory of gestural arrest (formulated in response to Brecht's epic theater) in contradistinction to what she calls Laban's "gestural flow" and Wigman's "vibrato," arguing that Benjamin's theory reveals and deconstructs ideological implications of the body's conditions, while Laban and Wigman do not develop their techniques into the political.

⁵⁰Anson Rabinbach, "The Inverted Nationalism of Hugo Ball's *Critique of the German Intelligentsia*," in Hugo Ball, *The Critique of the German Intelligentsia*, trans. Brian Harris (New York: Columbia University, 1999), 227, note 2.

⁵¹Gregory J. Seigworth and Melissa Gregg, "An Inventory of Shimmers," in *The Affect Theory Reader* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2010), 1–25. The question "What can a body do?" is drawn directly from Gilles Deleuze's discussion of Baruch Spinoza in "What Can a Body Do?," in *Expressionism in Philosophy: Spinoza*, trans. Martin Joughin (New York: Zone Books, 1990), although this line of questioning was first introduced in Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari, "Becoming-Intense, Becoming-Animal," in *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*, trans. Brian Massumi (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1987), 257.

pivotal role for the artists of Zurich Dada, as a medium that took on “an imagined cluster of (desired, projected, assumed) functions.”⁵² As we have seen in the many accounts of Taeuber dancing, these rhetorical investments were deeply contested within the Zurich Dada group—hundred-jointed, incoherent, and, at times, troubling—but dazzling nonetheless.

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⁵²Pavle Levi, “Cinema by Other Means,” *October* 131 (Winter 2010): 51–68. Levi draws his discussion of cinema as a “theoretical object,” from Rosalind Krauss, “Reinventing the Medium,” *Critical Inquiry* 25, no. 2 (Winter 1999): 289–305.