**Expressionism and Dance**

In its relation to dance, Expressionism must be approached through diverse but related histories in the realms of theatre, dance and the visual arts. These histories trace a tendency from the nineteenth century through the 1930s toward the exploration of movement and gesture as a primary language and communicator of inner life. Within this history emerged the practice of free, absolute or new dance, and by the mid-1920s, a broad-based movement called, among other terms, modern dance, new artistic dance, and *Tanzkunst* (“dance art”).[[1]](#footnote-1) Expressionism in dance is largely associated with the years 1911 to 1936 and the work in Switzerland and Germany of its primary theorist, Rudolf Laban, and choreographer Mary Wigman. This periodization contrasts with the art-historical designation of German Expressionism as a movement in the visual arts from 1905 to 1920 associated with the activity surrounding the Bridge group (*Künstlergruppe Brücke*) in Dresden, The Blue Rider group (*Der Blaue Reiter*) in Munich and the journal and gallery *Der Sturm* in Berlin. In fact, the dance and art-historical histories are deeply entwined. Expressionist artists Emile Nolde and Ernst-Ludwig Kirchner were aware of the dance of their time and created works of art in which dance appears as a mark of Expressionism’s more general aspiration to link subjective experience with more eternal humanity and nature. In Vasily Kandinsky‘s *The Yellow Sound* written for theatre as early as 1909, dance figures as a compositional synthesis of line, colour, and time. Expressionist practitioners in both art and dance emphasized shared inner necessity and eternal principles over form and helped forge the watershed modernist development of abstraction. As Expressionism in dance focused on reaching absolute expression, free of music, the individual body’s significance was replaced by movement, and the representation of external form and narrative shifted to abstract gesture and intuited meaning. For Expressionist painters, dance was a model for how the individual self might communicate universal or absolute content.

**Origins and Major Figures**

At the turn of the nineteenth century, the teachings of French musician François Delsarte spread among practitioners of music, theatre and dance. For Delsarte, movement and gesture were the link between life, soul and spirit and the most direct communicators of emotional truth. By embracing Delsartian concepts of emotive movement based in the body’s natural form, weight, and connection to nature, dance reformers such as Isadora Duncan and Ruth St. Denis can be seen as early examples of the expressionist impulse in dance. The impulse also took root from early-twentieth-century German body culture and the life reform movement. In Hellerau, Émile Jaques-Dalcroze’s school of music, founded in 1910, trained students in rhythmic gymnastics, using movement to externalize intuitive sensations of harmony. Wigman and Suzanne Perrottet, Laban’s primary collaborators in forging the new dance, were trained teachers of the Dalcroze method called eurhythmics and hence integrated ideas and methods from eurhythmics into expressionist dance pedagogy. In the field of psychology, Wilhelm Worringer’s widely-read *Abstraction and Empathy* (1909) also provided Expressionism with a treatise on shared artistic volition and a justification of abstract form as the expression of individual psychic or spiritual states.

**Laban, Wigman and *Ausdruckstanz***

While Wigman’s Dalcroze training at Hellerau from 1911 to 1913 introduced her to early Expressionist Bridge artists in nearby Dresden, Laban began teaching dance in 1910 within the fabled modernist milieu of Schwabing in Munich during the years of the Blue Rider group. A painter himself, Laban admired the innovations of Kandinsky as well as the dancing of Clotilde and Alexander Sakharoff. From 1913 to 1917 Laban ran his school from the utopian community on Monte Verità near Ascona, Switzerland. Wigman joined him there in 1913 on the painter Nolde’s recommendation. In Ascona, Laban and his followers developed the theories and eventually the notation for a new dance. Promoting gymnastics, a vegetarian diet, freedom of dress, and connectedness to nature and the cosmos, Laban trained amateur dancers as ‘movement choirs’, a movement practice designed to create community rituals. Asserting dance’s autonomy from the other arts and its role as the unifier of emotion, intellect, and spirit, Laban and Wigman’s dancers often performed in masks to the spare sounds of percussion, with movement invoking Dionysian associations of the ecstatic and grotesque. Like many modernist artists and writers, Expressionist dance was greatly influenced by the writings of Friedrich Nietzsche who gave to dance the role of uniting man and nature. Nietzsche’s study of Greek tragedy also set up the new dance’s interest in choric movement and antiquity as a model for harmony between civilization and spiritual life.

In the years after the First World War, Laban’s followers opened dozens of schools across Europe, and Wigman established a central school in Dresden and branch schools in other major German cities. Both Wigman and Laban toured extensively and their schools produced many of the most well-known dancers of the interwar period, including Wigman’s students Gret Palucca and Harald Kreutzberg and the Laban-trained Kurt Jooss. Three Dance Congresses held in Germany between 1927 and 1930 gave Laban and Wigman a pulpit to promote the establishment of a German Dance Academy, and allowed for wide-ranging discussion on the new modern dance movement, later known as *Ausdruckstanz*. The movement may be generally conceived as a proprioceptive or kinesthetic experience of both dancer and viewer, and as the abstract form of psychological interiority. Laban and Wigman taught movement based in natural states of tension and relaxation, involving an intuitive use the entire body from head to fingers. As an example of expressionist choreography, Wigman’s second version of *Witch Dance* (*Hexentanz*) from 1926, filmed in 1930, shows the dancer stomping and clawing the air with sharp gestures; low and hunched, she seems to be following possessed inner impulses. Her mask and tightly woven and patterned robe separate her body in time and space to suggest pure physicality and emotion. Other dancers associated with Expressionism include the cabaret performers Valeska Gert and Niddy Impekoven and concert dancers Berthe Trümpy and Yvonne Georgi.

**Legacy for Modernism**

Dance expressionism complicates the history of avant-garde radicalism because of the movement’s alliance and cooptation by Hitler’s regime. Under the National Socialist state from 1933 to 1945, *Ausdruckstanz* became known simply as ‘German Dance’. The folk aspect of Laban’s movement choirs translated easily to the National Socialist Party’s *völkisch* pretentions, and Laban organized a festival of ‘German dance’ as part of the 1936 Berlin Olympic Games: Wigman, Palucca and Kreutzberg all participated. By the end of the regime, however, all these artists had been sidelined, as Nazi cultural politics looked to other forms of dance and movement culture as more effective forms of ‘invisible propaganda’ (Goebbels’s term).

In the 1970s and 1980s, as German visual artists revisited Expressionist painting as a source for painterly innovation, so too did German choreographers, notably Pina Bausch, revisit the work of her mentor Kurt Jooss and his generation of *Ausdruckstanz* artists. Working between dance and theatre, Bausch and her cohort gave a new meaning to a term first used by Jooss in 1928—*Tanztheater* (“dance theatre”).

**Nell Andrew**

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**Paratextual Materials**

Mary Wigman. *Hexentanz* (Witch dance). Version 2. 1926 (video). <http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2012/inventingabstraction/?work=238>

Rudolf Laban (video of dancers) <http://www.moma.org/interactives/exhibitions/2012/inventingabstraction/?work=237>

Valeska Gert, <http://www.movementresearch.org/criticalcorrespondence/blog/?p=4378>

Emile Nolde, Dance around the Golden Calf, 1910 <http://www.wikipaintings.org/en/emil-nolde/dance-around-the-golden-calf-1910>

Emil Nolde, Portrait of Mary Wigman, c.1920 http://www.artic.edu/aic/collections/artwork/150820

Ernst Ludwig Kirchner, Totentanz der Mary Wigman, 1926-28 <http://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Ernst_Ludwig_Kirchner,_Totentanz_der_Mary_Wigman,_1926-8.jpg>

Vasily Kandinsky, “Dance Curves: The Dances of Palucca” 1926

<http://germanhistorydocs.ghi-dc.org/sub_image.cfm?image_id=4335>

1. Not until the years after the First World War did the term *Ausdruckstanz* (dance of expression) come into common usage to designate the German modern-dance movement between the two world wars. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)