

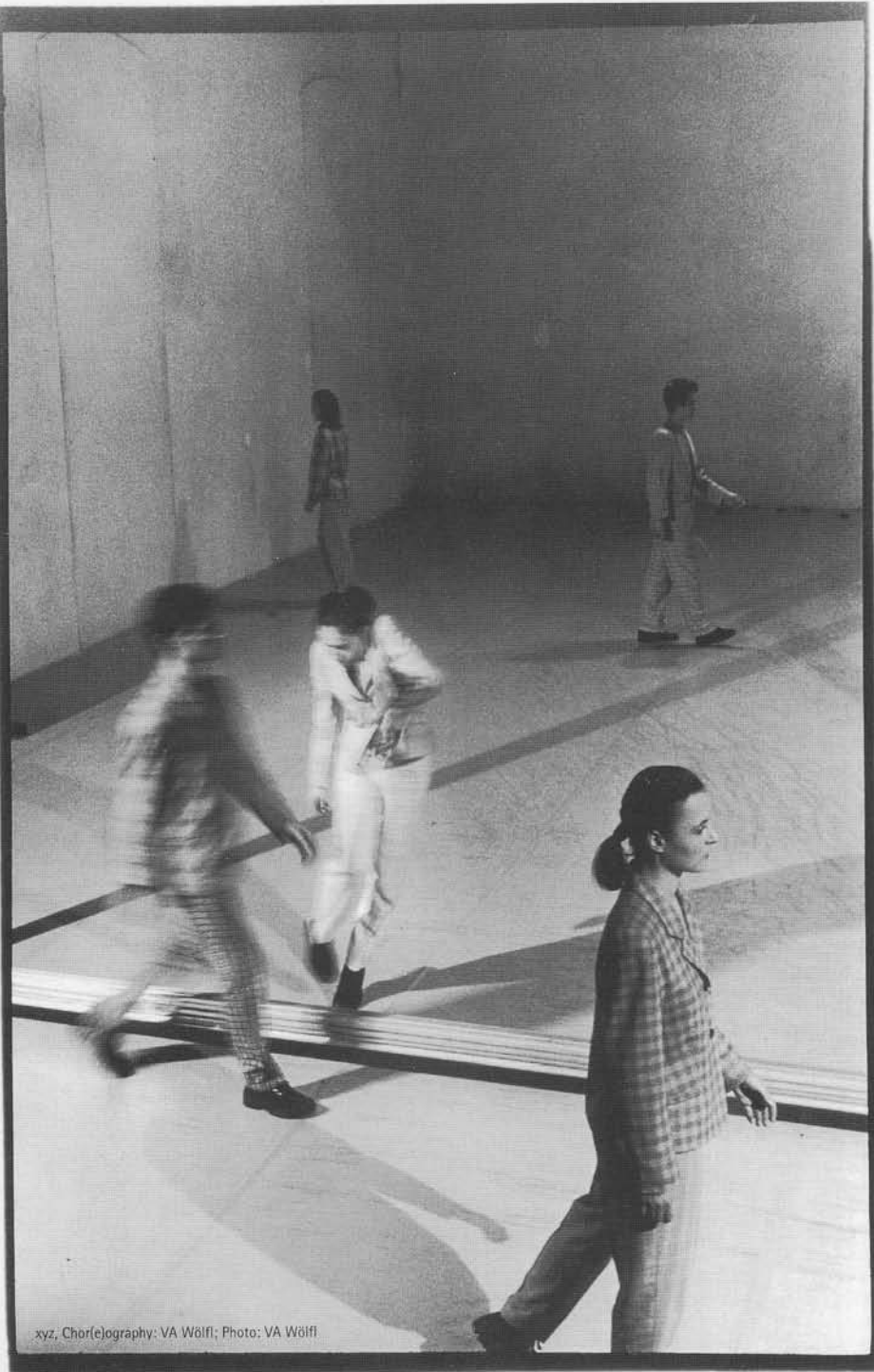
Gerald Siegmund

Clearing Spaces in Space: the Art of the Group NEUER TANZ

Something scratches, scrapes and breathes; you can hear it, you can feel it, but you can't see it. What's moving there on the totally darkened stage? What is it that has neither a visible form nor a shape? And what does this darkness set in motion — this long-lasting darkness which you must patiently endure while the Düsseldorf-based NEUER TANZ group performs its pieces — until the sheer absence of light finally allows you to see the light? The group's pieces are entitled LEITZ, dem Nachlaß verfallen (LEITZ, allowed to deteriorate, 1988) and they are performed in complete darkness, using movement sequences left over from earlier choreographies. Or else they bear the descriptive title Räumen (Creating Space, 1989), because the stage is constantly being reshaped. The dancers lie on their backs and stretch their legs beyond the lateral limits of the stage, which makes the stage seem to open upwards like a funnel.

In ELEPSIE, die Künstler sind anwesend (ELEPSIE, the artists are present, 1994), a white curtain hanging from an elliptical track demarcates a space within the space. Film projectors create walls of light; dancers with skateboards on their backs use the stage's rear wall as though it were a dance floor, as though the space had been turned backwards and set on edge. Again and again, dancers seated in the first row rush out of the audience and onto the stage, thus repealing the space's separation into auditorium and stage.

In xyz, which premiered in 1996 at the World Theater Festival in the old Festspielhaus in Hellerau near Dresden, a gigantic metal frame imposes its perspective on our view of the scene, while the dancers move along perpendicular lines upstage and down or from left to right. But the rigid axes of the coordinate system along which they stride are inevitably set in motion when the metal frame begins to turn, and what seemed like a fixed and predetermined space unexpectedly



xyz, Chor(e)ography: VA Wölfl; Photo: VA Wölfl

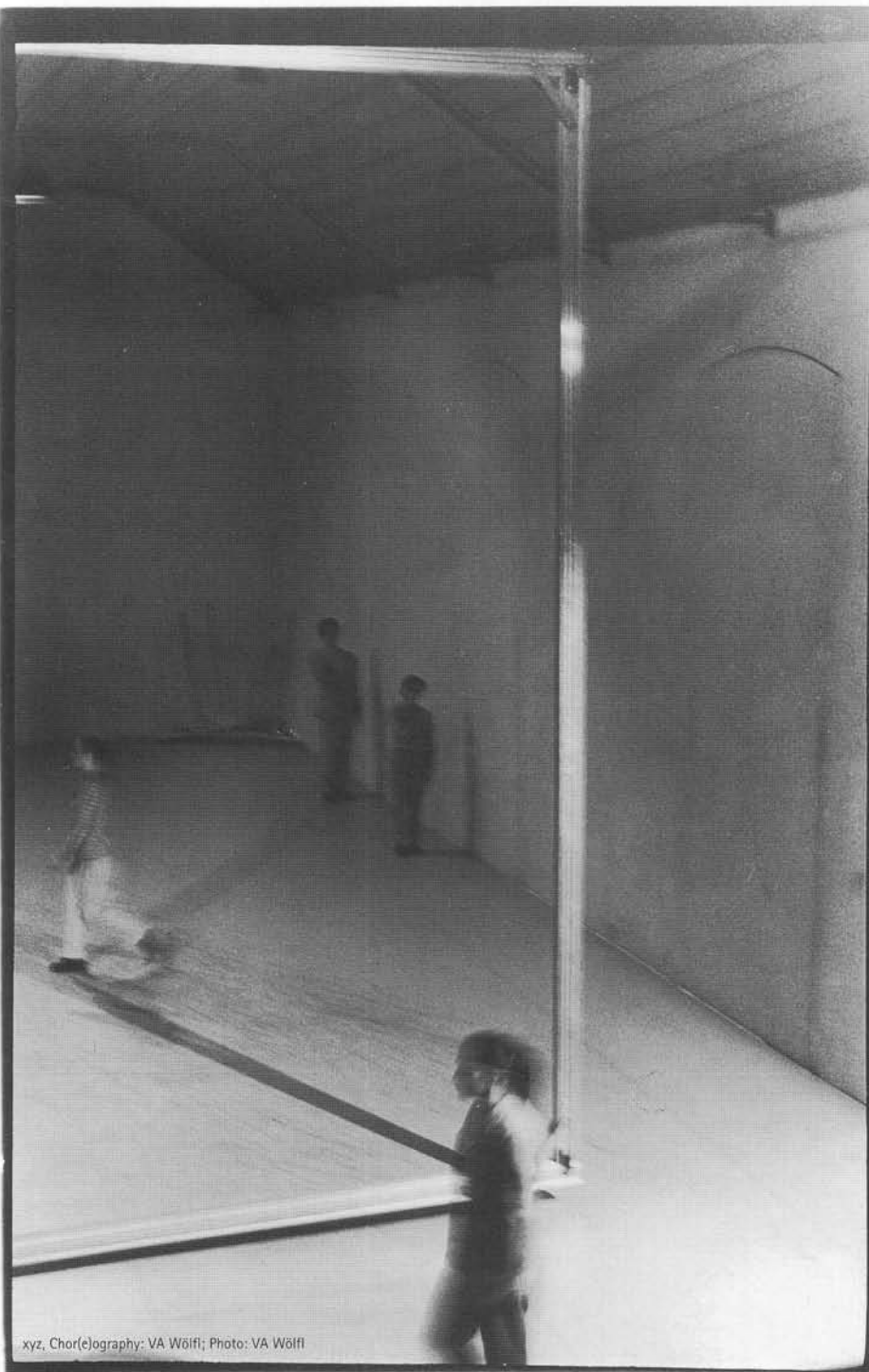
begins to expand and contract. This piece looks different in each space where it is performed; it is continually being reworked and adapted to suit the conditions of each individual theater space. If you've seen a piece by NEUER TANZ only once, you really haven't seen it.

For visual artist VA Wölfl, who (after the departure of his longtime collaborator Wanda Golonka) is now also responsible for the choreography of these pieces, the aesthetic space is no mere decorated hollow shape into which dancers can be placed. Space is much more than that: it's a dynamic principle which continually arises anew and passes away again with each movement of a dancer's body. Wölfl is willing to use any and every means to clear space: movement, light, sound, even time itself, which he repeatedly dilates through his use of slow-motion sequences. All of these elements are equally valid and mutually supportive in a precarious equilibrium rather than merely complementary and laid over one another.

Towards the end of the 18th century, the philosopher Immanuel Kant declared space to be a form of perception within human consciousness. Without the form-giving framework provided by consciousness, he argued, it would be impossible for us to perceive objects at all. Like Kant's view of space, VA Wölfl's work with space is a reflection upon the conditions which make space possible as a subjective category. Wölfl's work, therefore, represents his research into the fundamental Kantian preconditions of experience, namely, time and space. What forms can space assume, what does space look like, and above all, how does space allow us to view space? „Creating space means clearing places in which a god appears, places from which the gods have flown, places where epiphany hesitates for a long time.“ A recording of that statement from Martin Heidegger's Die Kunst und der Raum (Art and Space, 1969) is played aloud while Räumen is being performed. The statement is programmatic for the way in which pieces by the NEUER TANZ group use the aesthetic space. It emphasizes the fact that space and

TANZPLATTFORM DEUTSCHLAND

1994 Berlin
1996 Frankfurt
1998 München
2000 Hamburg



xyz, Chor(e)ography: VA Wölfl; Photo: VA Wölfl

In a.m./p.m. *Comfort by Design*, the group's newest piece, a gray dance floor continues up the walls. Immersed in blue, green or violet light, this opaque covering changes its apparent density and consistency. Drawn upwards to an exaggerated height, it creates an acoustic space which captures the sounds of the ensemble's immaculate bel canto voices as well as the other noises made by the performers. Assembled into a group, the dancers fall forwards or backwards, slam themselves hard against the floor, and allow movement to become audible voice with every breath they take.

What interests Wölfl this time are the movements of the sound, the ways it subsides and is collected again, as well as the many colors and tones within the acoustic space. He is investigating the double meaning of the Greek word chorós, which can signify choral song as well as group dancing. He simply erases the letter „e“ from the word „choreography“ and converts it into „chor(e)ography“ – the art of drawing with voices no less than with movements. The seven performers on the dancing ground become a group of singers in a choral space. With a tiny ironic wink of the eye, they allude to the singing and dancing chorus of Ancient Greek tragedy, the chorus which paced along the curve of the orchestra as it mourned the absence of the gods.

The gods have disappeared, and humankind has fallen into the void which they left behind. That's why there's no need to wait for some kind of god to return in these pieces by NEUER TANZ. In place of those vanished gods, we humans are left with our capacity to perceive, our ability to explore our habitat and make ourselves feel more or less at home within it. Human beings are the ones who clear spaces whenever we enter into relationships with other spaces or other individuals. What most characterizes NEUER TANZ's art of intermediate spaces, what occurs above all in this art, is a sharpening of the senses, an enhanced awareness of minimal changes in the relationships between people and things.

Whether or not to assign a meaning to what one has seen is a personal decision which each spectator must make on his or her own. That is the price which human beings are obliged to pay for having fallen into maturity, for having developed minds of their own. NEUER TANZ's art clears new spaces, opens intellectual spaces, and manumits imagination into freedom. When the theater's lights come on again after an hour's darkness, the space is empty. But our heads are filled with images of how that space could look.

creating space are activities; it uses the word „space“ to describe an empty shape which is nothing in itself; and it gives us reason to hope that a gestalt might suddenly emerge, suddenly manifest itself within the space, even though we can never be certain about the precise form of that gestalt. Have I really seen something, or are my senses deceiving me? These are questions which repeatedly arise when one watches Wölfl's pieces.

The gods whom Wölfl has banished from the dancing ground are also the gods of dance on stage. Because his spatial aesthetic remains aloof from the system of signs that customarily participates in the theatrical process, Wölfl's art shares certain points of contact with postmodern American minimalism. And his spatial aesthetic also attacks two of Terpsichore's sacred cows: the representative order of a self-contained societal space, and the emotions. Ever since ballet began in the royal courts of the 16th and 17th centuries, dance on stage – with its ideal lines and its clotting of emotion into typified gestures – has

tried to make visible an order which had become invisible. Dance on stage represents society's power structures by creating an ideal space subdivided by centralized perspective.

But the kings who once sat at the apex of the (visual) pyramid and cast their sovereign gazes upon the world have long since disappeared, as have the gods from whom those monarchs legitimated their rule by divine right. The noble spectators have long since been replaced by a democratic audience, and the overcoming of gravity as the ideal of beauty in the world of academic dance has been supplanted by the ideal of naturalness in „free“ or „modern“ dance. But Wölfl's other kind of modern dancing has also eradicated the metaphysical unity between inner and outer nature which „free“ or „modern“ dance once sought to evoke through empathy and imitation. What remains is a field of individual points, moments of sensual experience, gradations of visibility; a brittle and almost hermetic construct which refuses to accept all previous meanings. And although hard, almost cinematic cuts prevent it from flowing smoothly, the spectator nevertheless has access to this construct thanks to the concreteness of the processes and tasks shown on stage.

TANZPLATTFORM DEUTSCHLAND

1994 Berlin 1996 Frankfurt 1998 München 2000 Hamburg