

“Berlin . . . Your Dance Partner Is Death”

Kate Elswit



Two artifacts from the Weimar Republic signal the conflation of truth with a death that was not metaphysical but physical. First is a poster plastered around Berlin in 1919, which read: “Berlin, stop and think! Your dance partner is Death!” (fig. 1). The *memento mori* portrays a woman relinquishing physical control as she sags into the arms of a well-shod skeleton who leads the couple in a formal ballroom dance.¹ Paul Zech’s cautionary poem, from which the slogan was taken, juxtaposed the visceral horrors of World War I with the distractions of the city that prevented his addressee, Berlin, from hearing anything besides the screeching of violins that enticed fools to the masquerade (Zech [1914/16] 1980:496–97). Each stanza ends with a couplet that forewarns of the need to pay attention, because “your dance partner is” successively “gold,” “Satan,” “plague,” and finally “death.” Within the poster’s culturally coded iconography,

1. The image combines the final couplet from Zech’s poem “Berlin, halt ein” with Louis Raemaekers’s *German Tango* cartoon (1916), replacing the woman’s imperial crown in the original cartoon with a crown that appears to be made from the battlements of Berlin (see Simmons 1998). The woman on the poster bears a resemblance to the bronze statue of Berolina, which stood on Alexanderplatz at that time and functioned as an emblem of the city.

Berlin became the limp woman embracing skeletal death on a dance floor of inflation, political unrest, and memories of war.

The second artifact is a 1929 biographic novel's description of Anita Berber's final dance. With themes such as morphine and absinthe, Berber's erotic and macabre cabaret performances were so indistinguishable from her real addictions and behavior that when she collapsed onstage (according to the novelist) her third husband, watching from the wings, thought she was just performing:

“Dance in White” was listed on the program. A great, exotic bird swept over the stage, did two, three tired beats of its wings, sank slowly to the floorboards. No one had noticed how it was with her, not even Henri. When the curtain went up, she remained lying motionless on the floor. She could no longer rise. She had to be carried to bed. (Lania 1929:190)²

Whereas the poster uses an allegorical depiction of death to convey the authenticity of its sober image and slogan, the novelized account troubles that authenticity by suggesting the implicit dangerous slippages between reality and illusion when death was staged in live performance. I investigate these boundaries here using three Weimar choreographer/performers' dances of death: Berber's *Kokain* (Cocaine; 1922), Kurt Jooss's *Der Grüne Tisch* (The Green Table; 1932), and Valeska Gert's *Der Tod* (Death; 1922). Beyond the obvious topical preoccupations with death, these pieces have been chosen for the subtle ways they negotiated mortality in performance—not only the dances' own inevitable disappearance, but also their historically specific condition of being liable to death. And they staged this mortality in a fundamentally animate medium at a time when dance aficionados were proclaiming that, “The human body does not lie” (Suhr 1923:652).

Perhaps wishing to ascribe to choreographic motivations a veracity equal to the works' impact on audiences, dance historians have since explained not only Berber's but all three dances in relation to personal experiences and the choreographers' psychological profiles. For example, Fred Hildenbrandt describes the impetus for Gert's performance as the moment when she was standing outside her father's death room, unable to go inside, yet “knowing” how he looked (1928:131). Similarly, Jooss's descriptions of watching soldiers pass his home on their way to the First World War, and his own brothers' subsequent deaths in combat, are frequently cited (see for example Stöckemann 2001:156). Despite such authentication, the deep irony of these performances is that, although the choreographers chose death as the central concept or figure through which to address the realities of their world, death must always remain a phantasm onstage.

The political implications of such dances of death during the Weimar Republic have been discussed, particularly in relation to the protofascism of Mary Wigman's 1930 *Totenmal* and the anti-war implications of Jooss's *The Green Table*.³ However, such studies of the dances' polemical

2. All translations are my own, except where otherwise indicated.

3. See, for example, Manning (1989) and Hardt (2004:174–87). *The Green Table* remains in international repertoires today, its monumentality conferred and confirmed by Labanotation scores, and its poignant political commentary has been reiterated for new wars.

Figure 1. (previous page) This 1919 poster takes its slogan from a poem by Paul Zech warning Berlin to “Stop and think! Your dance partner is Death.” (Courtesy of the Hoover Institution on War and Revolution, Poster Collection GE 2361)

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aspects tend to take death as a representational given, rather than considering the challenge of representing death in physical performance. My interest here is the problematic nature of staging death in dance during a time when dance was undergoing dramatic upheavals, with its significance increasingly derived from the dramaturgy of the movement itself.

In a review essay about recent German dance scholarship, Marion Kant challenges the narrative foundation for most studies of 20th-century modern dance: that modernity is the successive liberation of the body (2006:56). Perhaps the onstage portrayal of death, as simultaneously a powerful topos of authenticity in early-20th-century Germany and a delineation of the (im)possible in live performance, is one way to complicate this narrative. The liberation narrative supports the main theme of numerous volumes published in Germany during the first decades of the 20th century to document how modern dance utilized the body's physical potential for direct and instantly comprehensible expression.⁴ For Paul Nikolaus in 1919, dance signifies a means through which “the soulful experience becomes eternally valid expression” (59) without the mediation required of other mediums. As Werner Suhr sums up in 1927: “Artistic dance is like every art: expression! It is however the most direct, because what should be expressed lives already from the start inside of what expresses” (16). Dance theorists and reformers positioned the ballet of the preceding centuries as an idealized embodiment that subsumed the physical body's effort into illusion (Brandenburg 1921), to which their own generation's dance was meant as an antidote. They traced a lineage from past eras, in which a dance evening was “a nice experience, a harmless, small piquant thing,” to the serious work of their own period, in which “the problematic of dance revealed itself as the problem of humans” (Suhr 1922/1923:642, 644).

If earlier practices spectacularized ideal bodily images, then the liberation that accompanied discussions of modern dance's expressive bodies can be troubled by drawing attention to the ways in which these choreographers also constructed spectacles. The mutation, rather than abandonment, of illusions is broadly noted by Dianne S. Howe, who develops a dialectic between the ballet that projected illusions of external reality and the modern dance, in which “the primary illusion became the projection of inner experience” (1995:264). Although such generalizations provide a starting point from which to approach the intricate phantasm of death in modern dance, Howe does not account for physical contamination of the illusions that were meant to seamlessly convey “inner truth.” One counterexample of compromised expressivity might be a description of Berber that compares her to other dancers of her time, stating that her elementary gesture was too earthy to have the “liberated majesty” of the ideal expressionistic gestures (Nikolaus 1919:78–79). What becomes visible in performances that stage death is that spectacles of the real demand to be perceived as authentic by displaying the performers' bodies at their physical limits; but approaching those limits simultaneously reinforced and challenged their necessary illusions.

If I were to adopt a Lacanian approach, I would position the “real” of these spectacles as the unknowable, with the performances themselves, like monuments to the dead, symbolizing loss.⁵ Instead, I begin with physical phenomena and posit that these dances exhibited a physical real that became reality through the inevitable materiality of the performers' bodies. Death first

4. This notion of “expression” is troubled by early German modern dance's—later dubbed *Ausdruckstanz* (the dance of expression or expressionistic dance)—unique trajectory as differentiated from *Expressionismus*. For a recent clarification of *Ausdruckstanz*, see Franco (2007).

5. For an overview of the multiple understandings of the “real” in contemporary cultural criticism, see Belsey (2004). In recent writing on Pina Bausch, Ciane Fernandes (2001) attempts to reconcile poststructuralist analysis with structuralist movement by equating the “real” with the physicality of dance. Although such a perspective is useful in facilitating Fernandes's particular examination, I would like to resist the Lacanian construction of the “real” in favor of recuperating the word's more material possibilities, in the manner suggested by Jones's explorations of the “not-fake” that sustains the possibility of the “not-real” (2006:82).

enters metaphorically as a trope to which studies of live performance are partial in order to cope with presence's other, its absence. Like Peggy Phelan, who describes performance as a rehearsal for death (1997:3), Herbert Blau writes that "theatre stinks most of mortality" ([1982] 1991:83) because he sees the performer with the passage of each moment as capable of and quite actually dying before the audience. But the death that Blau and Phelan see carried by the liveness of all performance can be particularized historically. During World War I and the subsequent Weimar Republic, within a framework of physical expression and destruction that equated physicality to authenticity and manipulability, the implicit mortality of the material body became the primary content of many performances—and not only because of the live performer's ubiquitous presence on the brink of time.

Artful Deaths

Death exemplifies the boundaries of performance in Frank Thiess's 1920 examination of dance as an art that was contingent upon its relationship to reality having the same aesthetic foundation as the other arts (14). To illustrate the duality of art and nature, Thiess uses Michel Fokine's *The Dying Swan*, created for and danced by Anna Pavlova from 1905 until her death in 1931. Thiess begins by questioning whether the audience actually saw a dying swan or whether they instead saw a scene that evoked the illusion of a dying swan (23), asserting: "What we see with our eyes [...] has actually nothing to do with a dying swan" (24). For Thiess, the spectator who had not read the program would not be obligated to think of the poor creature. Thus, the dance did not actually reproduce through physical movement the famous folk tale of the dying swan, but rather

it transforms the poetic-mystic psyche of this mythical act into the "appearance world" of its art and therewith erects not only a new creation with new and unique laws, but allows this creation to be fully independent from that which is transformed, from the poetic content of the myth. (25)

Returning to Pavlova, Thiess claims that the "enormity" of her performance lay in her presentation of "the physical breakdown of a supernaturally delicate creature" without resorting to realism; instead of seeking a factual replication of reality, she "absorbs the idea of reality into the world of her appearance" (25).

This same staged moment reappears in 1953 to support Susanne K. Langer's contradiction to dance's unique emotive-symptom hypothesis, in which she claims, "No one, to my knowledge, has ever maintained that Pavlova's rendering of slowly ebbing life in 'The Dying Swan' was most successful when she actually felt faint and sick" (177). But whereas Thiess uses the scene to separate the movement of the swan from the essence that became the audience's perception of it, Langer develops a division between the actual movement—which she attributes to the dancer—and a second, transformative component, produced by the dancer but insulated from the dancer's personal feelings—which she calls "virtual self-expression" (178). When discussing the swan, Langer's assertion that dance is governed by imagined feeling rather than real emotions supports Fokine's own instruction that the dancer must entirely exclude any realistic expression of physical suffering, since "the life gesture from which the dance is developed must be raised above the everyday realism to aesthetic heights" (1925:14).

However, not all dances aspired to the transcendence of Fokine and Pavlova's dying swan and, in negotiating those that did not, there is value in attending to the elision of boundaries between physical factuality and virtual self-expression. In the same way that Karl Toepfer ultimately notes how Thiess's ideals of beauty became inadequate when dealing with the "complexities and ambiguities of *Ausdruckstanz* in the postwar years" (1997:343), Susan Foster critiques Langer for never going "beyond the insight that dance functions as a system of representation" (1986:230). As Foster and Toepfer both observe, neither theorization seems equipped to deal with stresses posed to the aesthetic system.

One of the most extended studies of the complex material interactions between death, aesthetics, and spectatorship is Elisabeth Bronfen's *Over Her Dead Body: Death, Femininity and the Aesthetic* (1992), in which she suggests that pictorial and textual representations of dead women over the past three centuries performed the same tension-relieving function as repetition does in Sigmund Freud's death-drive. Ultimately constituting an act of substitution that denied death, artistic mediation replicated the real body experience of death in an objectified form that "mitigates the violence posed by the real" (46). For Bronfen, such representations of death diffused its threat, suspending the moment of death by transforming it into an artwork in which the brush-strokes or language erased the corpse itself:

In order to be "sharable," her experience of the death process has to be translated beyond the boundaries of her real body—the private into a public world of signs—but this act of figuration or representation also forecloses the real [...]. The threat that real death poses to any sense of stability, wholeness, individual uniqueness or immortality is antidoted through representations that "exteriorise" this real by transferring it on to an image/signifier. (46)

Bronfen takes something for granted about the nature of the artistic media and their signifying processes in representing death. She assumes that the artistic medium must be different from that of the death itself, whereas all performance, and especially dance, relies on the performer's body. Nikolaus suggests that the poet was detached from the poem, the composer from the music, and the painter from the canvas, whereas the dancer is simultaneously creator and interpreter (1919:67). This not only produced a direct effect, as identified by Suhr's explanation that what should be expressed resided within that which expressed, it also mystified that effect in a manner often overlooked. Because Bronfen does not address the possibility of bodies as a medium, her argument assumes that the act of representation is a doubling that will always manifest in a fixed form and thus arrest death. Likewise, the nightly repetition of performers' deaths might be seen to constitute a similar doubling effect. However, while performance's animation precludes the static artistic products that result in a doubling effect in other mediums, it nevertheless invokes a double-death by repeatedly and consciously staging mortality through a form that is already, to borrow from Blau, rendered mortal by its constant disappearance. Yet, at the same time, the very project of dancing death is in itself a denial of rigor mortis.

Bronfen's only divergence from the inscription of death over a passive female body occurs with the agency she identifies in women's suicides, which constitute an act of "staging disembodiment." She posits suicide as authorship where a woman uses death "as a form of writing with her body, a materialization of the sign, where the sheer material factualness of the dying and dead body lends certainty, authority, and realness to this attempt at self-textualization" (141–42). Here, the performance act within the paradoxical spectacles of the real differentiates itself from other media. The agency that Berber, Gert, and Jooss exhibited by choreographing death onto their own bodies was both compounded and released because their bodies did not disappear in the act, but instead remained to negotiate the resultant tension.⁶ Bronfen's dead women hover uncannily between the materiality of the corpse, placed outside of language by suicide, and the textuality into which they are reinscribed by the survivors who seek meaning. Whereas Bronfen's disembodied suicides perform an authenticating self-immolation that finds a recipient in the imagination of their survivors, the live performers of death entered not into death itself, but into a spectacle of mortality that was also experienced at a certain corporeal level. Their endurance as survivors constituted an intrinsic aspect of the performance.

Thus the material truth, which Bronfen locates on the aestheticized corpses of painting, prose, and poetry, can be unsettled by these performances in which authenticity was consciously

6. As I will discuss later, although Gert's and Berber's solo dances of death are more readily comparable to Bronfen's female suicides, I do not wish to overlook the fact that Jooss, despite playing the male who brings death to others, also cast himself as Death, a role not untroubled by mortality.

managed on the boundary between the actual kinesthetic event and the impossibility of death. In discussing such spectacles of the real in relation to dances of death, I seek to move beyond the implicit identification of the body with authenticity and attend instead to the perceptual instabilities inherent in such palpable, yet staged, challenges to the limits of physical function: the tension between the body's authentic experience and its repeatedly staged entry into extreme situations in the service of veracity. Amid the early 20th century's nascent discussions of dance that was no longer bound to serve narrative, but instead focused on the authentic expressive capacities of the dancing body itself, I am interested in the logistics of unattainable death as the chosen dance partner.

Weimar Dances of Death as Spectacles of the Real

A 1938 description of Harald Kreutzberg's famous *Der Ewige Kreis: Eine Legende vom Tod* (The Eternal Circle: A Legend of Death; 1938) posits that the piece was unique in overpowering the dichotomy between life and death that lingered from the tradition of medieval murals through to contemporary manifestations. The reviewer, Fritz Böhme, was moved by the way Kreutzberg's performance conveyed "the truth, that death exists in every moment of living" (in Scheier 1997:78). In many ways, Kreutzberg's performance was not truly distinct from other dances of death performed over the preceding 20 years. However, Böhme's proposition might be abstracted and adapted to describe more generally the state of many dances of death during the period: the inevitability of death in life and the animation of life, which complicates death's authenticity and finality.

Artistic negotiations with death proliferated in the period during and following World War I, from prints, paintings, and films to cabaret songs, poems, and plays—as well as in dances. The war's 10.3 percent German casualty rate was not the bloodiest in German history; tangible images of death had gained popularity in Romantic art from such bloody events as the French Revolution, the Napoleonic Wars, and the Seven Years War. However, the Great War was striking in its full-scale use of technology for mass physical destruction. Death was transformed from something spiritual into a bodily act, as demonstrated by Zech's poem, where even the image of God "decays to blood and mud," and the expendable materiality of human bodies was located in an image of a bloated whore in a golden rocking chair swallowing whole youths, including their skin and hair ([1914/16] 1980:496–97).

Arguing that World War I actualized the metaphor of the political body in European culture, Inge Baxmann makes a case for the images of mutilated soldiers consolidating real and imagined injuries of the national community (2000:181). Although Baxmann separates representations of the taboo, wounded body from the "natural" dead one, such a division is complicated in the case of danced deaths, which neither portrayed the wounding alone nor completed the process of death. And despite the incomplete resuscitation implicit in their repetition, neither did these dances offer the resurrection that Baxmann identifies in the mythical social postwar regeneration of the national body (183–85).

Instead, the Weimar choreographers often retained death within the dances, moving beyond allegory toward a visible manifestation of death and its impact on the labor of dancing bodies. Although perhaps only Jooss's *Green Table* embodied the dance of death's traditional processional, pieces exploring death were prevalent.⁷ Spectacles of the real can first be engaged as those performances that staged the corporeality of death; central to the dances discussed in this essay is how they embodied death not only referentially or virtually, but also as a tangible human event, thus moving beyond *The Dying Swan's* sublimation to explore mortality as a condition

7. It might seem that men most often personified Death and women his effects. However, the proliferation of Salomé dances, including those by Wigman, Gert, and Berber, suggest that women also staged themselves with lethal characteristics.

of the human body. Jooss, Gert, and Berber each invoked the corporeality in Ausdruckstanz's project of drawing out the expressive capacities of the human body—albeit in very different ways—while their unique locations, eccentric to absolute dance and mass dance, resisted the transcendental impulses associated with a more metaphysical interest in expression.⁸ By concentrating on dances with a more firmly fixed corporeality, it is possible to build a model of the relationship between enactment and display in these spectacles of the real—a model capable of encompassing the diverse other forms in which dances of death manifested.

Even given such corporeality, a real death is not acceptable onstage; these were not “snuff” performances. Death was portrayed through phantasm. Thus, despite the seeming authenticity of their corporeality, spectacles of the real depended on a precarious relationship between enactment and display. As David Graver writes, violence is difficult to show as theatre because it is so volatile that it threatens to disrupt the balance between display and enactment (1995:48). Likewise, the performances under discussion oscillated between *enactment*—the dancers' physicality as rooted in the biological present—and *display* or *representation*—its transformation within a theatrical context to create the virtual event shared by the audience.

This dichotomy is implicitly understood and yet rarely addressed by dance scholars. Foster contends that most 20th-century dance combines the imitative and the replicative (1986:75). However, both the imitative and the replicative are modes of representation that do not fully accommodate what I am proposing here about dimensions of embodiment: that there was also a direct, “authentic” aspect to these dances of death. Graver's vision aligns more closely with Stanton Garner's performance phenomenology in which “the performing body occupies a paradoxical role as both the activating agent of such dualities as presentation/representation, sign/referent, reality/illusion and that which most dramatically threatens to collapse them” (1994:44). However, when such thinking moves into dance studies proper, it tends to absorb the oddly affirmative rhetoric of physicality that helps motivate one to work daily in a studio but is problematic for historical research. If this affirmative rhetoric is privileged by modern dance's narrative of liberation, then alternative articulations only become possible after “modernity's investment on its odd hyperkinetic being” has been defamiliarized, rather than taken as given (Lepecki 2006:5). In the current state of dance scholarship, where people such as Lepecki and Gerald Siegmund (2006) disrupt the previously less questioned relationship between dance and movement, the peculiarity of animate deaths begins to appear.

As the examples of Jooss, Gert, and Berber will show, the heterogeneous spectacles of the real can be defined as those performances engaging the topos of death where the (stinking) mortality—the materiality of the dancing body's enactment—directly impacted its display, ultimately producing a staged illusion as a means to convey something deemed an essential human truth. The choreography was derived from an oscillation between the authentic kinetic event that stressed the body's limits and the awareness of performing before an audience. Examining the relationship between the aesthetic and the actual, Geoffrey H. Hartman positions art as a critical battleground in “the struggle against inauthenticity.” He asks: “How does imagination become a reality principle? How does the reality of art lessen the sense of unreality that so often invades us?” (2002:48). These questions underlie the spectacles of the real, which did not escape into aesthetics but rather relied on both enactment and display to create performances that, as was written of Jooss, presented the “barest suggestion, but a suggestion so heightened as to be indeed more real than realism” (Martin 1932:X8).

The interplay between enactment and display differed substantially among the three performances. In *The Green Table*, the sustained dancing of Death and his victims held the threat of

8. I have chosen not to concentrate on any of Wigman's seven dances of death between 1917 and 1934, all of which tend to mourn or venerate death as well as showing it, thus introducing more superphysical themes such as martyrdom. See Wigman (1966 [1963]) for a chronology.

actual death at a distance; in *Death*, Gert tested the failure of both her body and the conventions of dance, but she died standing in full control of her performances; in *Cocaine*, Berber's dance of drug addiction was subsumed by her real addiction, eventually fulfilling the threat of permanent stasis that Gert had only toyed with.

As one of several pieces—including Wigman's *Totenmal* and Laban's *Die Grünen Clowns* (Green Clowns; 1928), which developed as reflections on World War I—*The Green Table* oscillated neatly between death and dance. Its allegorical figures proceeded through a series of eight scenes, like Expressionist theatre's station dramas, but resisted sublimation into either the political or the metaphysical through constant physiological feedback. *The Green Table* is a 35-minute ensemble piece in which Death—as a strange hybrid of skeleton and German soldier—interacts with different social archetypes, from soldiers leaving for battle to a guerilla fighter and an old woman.⁹ Although created almost 10 years after *Death* and *Cocaine*, *The Green Table* rested on the brink of more traditional treatments of death like *The Dying Swan* in which, as Thiess pointed out, death entered the piece by reference to an extratheatrical story, and the spectacles of the real, in which death had a distinctly physical presence. Even Death's skeletal costume embodied this liminality, both referencing the medieval dances of death and appearing as an eviscerated soldier, with bones constructed from remnants of a military uniform.

At issue in *The Green Table* is the physicality of Death as embodied by a choreographer-performer at the end of the Weimar Republic. *The Green Table* began in 1927 as a masked duet for Jooss and Sigurd Leeder. Jooss's knee injury had prevented its completion at the time, and he returned to the motif in solo form just before the 1932 Paris competition, but changed it since the rules stipulated a minimum of six dancers. In interviews later in his life, Jooss also related the character of Death to another solo, one that he choreographed and performed for Expressionist theatre director Georg Kaiser's 1930 play *Europa*. Jooss's casting of himself as the figure who brings death to almost all the other dancers might be comparable to male authors and painters who deferred death by aestheticizing it in the corpses of beautiful young women. However, there remains something mortal in the role that Jooss took on, a liability to death that perhaps extended the earlier solos into the role of a Death, whose animation did not exempt him from being subject to his own laws.

As more explicit solos, Gert's and Berber's dances derive a certain authority from the fact that they choreographed the deaths for themselves as performers. Both were autobiographic in the sense that neither woman took on an overt character in a devised narrative. As one reviewer wrote of Gert's work: "This body is not hindered from testifying what it wants to testify. And its testimony comes from no idea but from itself [...] Always only from itself. Gert thus dances, put more precisely, autobiographical dances" (Hildenbrandt n.d.). Female suicide is framed by Bronfen within a language of performance, offering an "effective communicative act" for women because it "involves self-reflexivity in so far as death is chosen and performed by the woman herself by means of an act that makes her both object and subject of dying and representation," thus granting a uniquely powerful authority to otherwise marginalized voices (1992:141). Whereas Jooss occupied dual roles as Death—one who brings death to others and one who is susceptible to it—those roles were compounded reflexively for Gert and Berber, who both caused and experienced the representations of their own dying. However, where Bronfen views female suicides as acts of "staging disembodiment," none of the danced deaths disappeared from visibility; rather, the survival of their animate bodies suspended them in performance's oscillations between enactment and display.

9. Although I have seen this piece performed live, I am basing my description primarily on the 1966 BBC recording of Jooss's Folkwang Ballett performing the piece, together with the notated score and some older films. The Kurt Jooss Archive contains a short clip of *The Green Table*, filmed in the 1930s in Chicago, and the Laban Archive also contains 1940s footage of the Jooss company, which are helpful in considering how the movement may have changed between iterations.



Figure 2. Anita Berber dances *Cocaine* in the 1923 Austrian film *Moderne Tänze*. (Courtesy of Filmmuseum Berlin, Deutsche Kinemathek)

With Gert's *Death*, the amplitude of the oscillation varied as the dancing body's liability to death threatened to contaminate the conventions of performance. The piece was only about two minutes long, during which Gert stood in place and "died" in silence.¹⁰ The dance appeared just as Expressionism waned. *Death* was discussed as a great achievement because of the absence of mimesis, which was perceived as "only possible if the artist in the moment of expression itself experiences the whole convulsion, the whole feeling of death, puts herself wholly into the feeling" (C.L. n.d.). Although dance was the authentic enactment and death the display, without a choreography of recognizable dance steps it was difficult for audiences to distinguish between when Gert danced and when she died.

Berber's *Cocaine* was characterized by a similarly unstable oscillation that might be imagined as a double helix, in which the components of enactment and display collapsed onto one another as they exchanged places, only to extend to points of estrangement and return.¹¹ A seven-minute solo that combined the topic of drug addiction with conventional balletic vocabulary and expressionistic pathos, *Cocaine* was not a dance of death in itself beyond its uncanny choice of music; it became one primarily in relation to Berber's tragic personal life as publicized through articles and books such as the one I referred to at the beginning of this essay. Although Berber

10. This piece was among those filmed by Suse Byk in 1925 and is housed at the Museum of Modern Art in New York; Gert also performed it in Volker Schlöndorff's 1984 documentary.

11. Only a few still frames such as the one that accompanies this article remain from film footage of this piece. I have estimated the length on the basis of the song that accompanied it, and my descriptions of the movement and content come from reviews and other descriptions, combined with footage I have seen of Berber dancing in other films, including *Dr. Mabuse, der Spieler* (1922) and *Unheimliche Geschichten* (1919).

intended the performance to speak to universal concerns,¹² the attempt was overwhelmed by the artist's nearness to her own actual self-destruction. A haunting book published by Joe Jenčík shortly after Berber's 1928 death describes her performances in terms of a "difficult, unprofessional surgical operation" that contained both the visceral nature of Berber's incomplete self-immolation and the act's partial resurrection in daily performance. Jenčík writes graphically and metaphorically of how Berber used a scalpel to cut away her own skin, muscles, and entrails in search of an abscess, which burst under the scalpel and ultimately drowned her in its pus. The description concludes: "The hand with the scalpel led the audience to her. She sacrificed her identity daily for this frivolous vivisection" (1930:2–3).

Grave Action

In "Jooss's Wise Covenant with Death" (2003), Claudia Jeschke makes the vast claim that *The Green Table's* dance was a metaphor for life. This hypothesis can be troubled by examining the animation within the piece, not as a given affirmation of life as Jeschke suggests, but rather as a complication at the threshold of the real. Rephrased, I am speaking not about a dance of death, but death's dance. In *The Green Table*, Death is almost always moving; even when hovering at the back of the stage while men fight or women weep, his feet often stamp a rhythm that the main scene is compelled to follow. His incessant motion leaves male and female corpses in his wake, collapsed on the ground or in his arms, who vanish offstage to be resurrected in time to relive their deaths during the "Aftermath" scene. This means that the other dancers were able to equate death with the inanimate, whereas only Death, who was originally the choreographer, had to keep dancing.

Despite this mobility, the figure of Death does not necessarily summon "a temporary suspension of the ordinary rules of existence" (Walther 1993:66). Other characters in *The Green Table* exhibit a tension between the physical body's obedience and challenge to its own natural laws, while Death establishes mortal authority through his own physical acquiescence to one particular law of nature, ultimately deriving his import—or graveness—directly from gravity. To indulge in a word game, I equate the natural law of gravity with gravity as the condition of being grave—as in serious—which in turn references a place for burial or, metaphorically, death itself. Jooss discussed the expressive impact of gravity on the human form most concretely in two interviews late in his life. He clarified how gravity and the downward motions that accompanied it exemplified extreme humanity, and by extension, extreme mortality. Referencing what I have introduced as idealized spectacles of embodiment, Jooss described how 19th-century ballet protagonists were physically buoyant princesses and fairies. But after the difficulties faced by Germany in the 1920s, Jooss felt the need for a weighted, "ugly," or "ignoble" physicality to stage peasants and other "no longer superhuman" characters of a more realistic and "democratic" world (Jooss 1976:28–29; BBC1 1976).¹³ If Jooss used weight to achieve realistic characters, then it is significant that Death carried the most weight and therefore was the piece's most "real" figure. Thus the expressionistic heritage evident in casting an archetypal figure like Death was reinforced by exaggerating this figure beyond psychological realism, but it was also destabilized by the humanness from which Death derived his authority, in a performance that was described as "undeclamatory and thereby realistic" (*Bremen General-Anzeiger* 1932).

John Martin observes in his review that Death was naturally the only victor, "but it is not a grim and villainous Death as danced by Jooss." Instead, "The great beauty of his performance lies in this unwonted gentleness. One is made to feel that he exemplifies no supernatural agency

12. This becomes evident from the poems and essays in Berber and Droste's 1922 book that bore the same title as a dance concert, as well as a conversation recounted by Hildenbrandt (1966:142).

13. Jooss's notions about gravity can be connected to the "psychology of movement" that he used to define his characters, based upon the eukinetic typing of dancers' movement according to expressive style, which he helped Laban to develop (see Jooss 1933:454; Partsch-Bergsohn 1986).

of fate, but a power of evil driven, like its victims, against its will by the malice of men” (1932:X8). In fact, Martin inadvertently indicates the physical acts that actualized the death narrative in his erroneous citation of *The Green Table*’s subtitle not as a dance of death, or *Totentanz*, but a *Tatentanz*—a dance of actions. Death’s weight was mentioned in reviews and in dancers’ accounts, ranging from Martin’s strangely evocative term “lumbering” (X8) to more illustrative constructions, such as one later reviewer who described him “making every detail heavy with menace” (Pratt 1953). Although the score indicates that Death’s boots always made sound, one dancer who performed Death



Figure 3. Death’s processional march in 1932 during Scene 7, “The Aftermath,” in *The Green Table*. (Courtesy of Jooss-Archiv Köln/Amsterdam in Deutsches Tanzarchiv Köln, © Albert Renger-Patzsch Archiv/Ann and Jürgen Wilde, Köln/ VG Bildkunst, Bonn/DACS, London 2008)

in the Joffrey Ballet’s later staging of the piece noted that the noise was “merely incidental” to his relationship to “the floor with the sense of weight and gravity that Jooss instilled in me” (Holder 1993:83). The dichotomy between Death’s authoritative gravity and the uncertainty of the living was most clearly visible in the “Aftermath” section, where Death appears as the ringmaster at the center of a circus tent. The eight dancers, who had performed such distinct characters over the previous 20 minutes, are in this scene fragile and interchangeable as they pop up and down around him with what the score calls a “weightless, void quality” (Markard 2003: II.40), appearing powerless in their momentary abstention from the natural laws of motion with which Death was complicit. Then they fall to the ground. In this scene, Death’s weighted physicality as he remains upright exemplifies his liminal situation, encompassing both the mortality of his extreme liability to gravity and the power it grants him.

Death’s presence on the brink of the spectacles of the real might also be mapped onto another transitional territory of embodiment. Although Marcia Siegel writes that Jooss’s ballets do not indulge in “the unreality of something so obviously made of flesh and blood” (1976:33), she never specifies what real thing that flesh and blood comprised. It is possible that the paradox of animate death was facilitated by the transposition of Death from human toward animal. In connecting *The Green Table* to his work for Kaiser, Jooss recalled telling his wife in 1930, “I must make a ballet where I can be such a beast, it’s wonderful. I would like to work on that idea,” commenting on the anecdote, “I forgot about that, but in the end the bull became the way to the figure of Death in *The Green Table*” (in Huxley 1982:8). In Kaiser’s play, Jooss played Zeus, including the bull Zeus transformed himself into while wooing Europa. Recalling the bull, Jooss emphasized his own personal satisfaction with performing *The Green Table*’s Death figure, particularly the sudden shifts that derived from the former character (Jooss 1976:7). Because Jooss later coached a dancer that Death “need not be insatiably animalistic” (Holder 1993:86), at issue is not a sense of actual bull-like-ness. Rather, the inclination toward animal allowed Death to establish consistent motivation and power in relation to natural laws of animation, while remaining exempted from the emotional particularities of being human. Perhaps this

transformation from human toward animal enabled Jooss to perform a second transformation, thus animating the inanimate without the need for a human resurrection.

What Died?

Whereas *The Green Table's* stylized choreography had neatly defined where the dance's presentation of physical laws ended and the representation of death began, Gert's *Death*, though also described as implementing "ever more powerfully a chromatic, hyper-realistic theatre into dance" (J.L. n.d.), retained no such distinctions. Surprisingly, even given recent interest in Gert, the death she enacted in this piece has rarely been analyzed beyond cursory references that situate it primarily in relation to her grotesque realism, thus affirming the death as hyperbolic but authentic.¹⁴ However, the trouble of enactment arises because Gert rejected notions of abstraction, saying, "Anyone is able to imagine anything that he wants and what is not at all situated in the dance" (1931b), thus implying that there had to be something mortal within her dance when she danced death. In part, the contamination of enactment and display resulted from the nature of the piece as a solo in which Gert underwent a set of tasks that she allowed herself to experience in the moment of performance (see Gert 1931a:51). The event was perceived by critics as "newly created every time in the moment of production" in a way that "guarantees genuineness and artistic veracity" (Böhme 1930). In fact, she discussed her fear of actually dying in the process of performance.

The dance was confined to actions of her upper body and face, with the animation negotiated through minute physical shifts, the magnitude of which became evident because of how little happened in a conventional dance sense. From a biomechanical standpoint, barely anything occurred in *Death* that was not a direct result of Gert increasing and then dissipating tension until her body shook slightly with the effort of supporting itself and then quieted altogether.¹⁵ By the end, "there stands now no longer a human on stage, no breathing creature, no longer a dancer but death, and not some symbol of death, but the deceased, dead Frau Valeska Gert" (Hildenbrandt 1928:129). Thus by portraying death through what appeared to be a failure of her bodily mechanism, until it could no longer resist the laws of nature acting upon it, Gert left her audience with the impression that her display was no different than her enactment.

Weimar era reviews of *Death* reveal that observers of Gert's dances perceived the contamination between illusion and material physicality as the performance of two deaths simultaneously: the physiological death of the performer that was experienced through the singular arc that built and then dissipated tension and, as a result, a secondary death of the theatrical convention that had previously required death to be something transcendently other than itself onstage. Reviewers debated whether Gert danced at all (see for example, Panter [1921] 1978:204). One Weimar era critic explained that Gert transformed the techniques that she usually used for parody toward the territory of serious representation (*Darstellung*). Using a wordplay on the verb *darstellen* (to represent), the reviewer drew attention to the unmediated sense that audiences had of her work: "She 'puts' [*stellt*] it in fact 'there' [*dar*]: not something like the grim reaper with the hourglass and scythe [...] but the sensation of a dying human, spasm and release" (H.W. n.d.). For Toepfer, the use of such techniques in *Death* exemplified how even Gert's most serious pieces "parodied conventions of signification" (1997:204). When Gert, as one writer suggests, "does nothing, she stands and dies [...]. It is a long death, that one must watch" (Hildenbrandt 1928:129–30), it is clear that her choreography was not built up from the feats she could accomplish with her body; rather, she staged a spectacle that exposed innate levels

14. As I will explore, the primary exception is a passage in Susanne Foellmer's recent book (2006), which situates *Death's* stylization of everyday actions and play with theatrical schema in relation to Brechtian *Gestus*.

15. The 1925 Byk film corresponds to Gert's own later description of this tension and release (see Gert 1968:49).

of bodily activity. In Gert's exhibition of mortality, reviewers perceived the disconcerting inability for audiences to proceed as they might normally, since to applaud would be to request an encore and, as one reviewer remarks, he could not imagine her dying a *second* time (in Foellmer 2006:197; see also Hildenbrandt 1966:234).

In *The Green Table*, the oscillation between dance and death was so clean that the theatrical framing receded, leaving audiences with the sense that they were witnessing "a truthful reproduction of nature which has become art by submission to the exigencies of the rhythm of music" (Wolkonsky 1933). By contrast, the disquieting imbalances of Gert's performances drew attention to the necessary apparatus of dancing death. In a film clip where she performed the piece at age 84, she alternated action with narration of action, fusing recollection with a performance that appeared nothing but experiential and in the moment, until the abrupt end when she returned to being the former diva charming the filmmaker who was bestowing attention upon her (Schlöndorff 1977). For Susanne Foellmer, this reconstruction "points to the *play* of the exposed gesture of death, which appeared to come so astonishingly near to the actual dying," with the fact that Gert died standing as exemplary of her theatricality (2006:186). To further complicate Foellmer's observation, Gert's theatrical play of death existed in a paradoxical relationship to her toppling of theatrical conventions. She attempted a formal death through a performance of death, when the conveyance of that mortal content relied upon certain conventions of the form.

The contamination between Gert's enactment and display engaged contemporaneous views of reality as illusion, the truth of which might only be approached through more illusions. According to Friedrich Nietzsche, if one's empirical existence and that of the larger world were to be taken as representation, then "we must now regard dream as the *semblance of the semblance*" ([1870] 1999:26). A 1930 article by Dr. Harry Prinz adopts this Nietzschean rhetoric to describe how "this woman [Gert] must have come, in order to show us the specters that surround us, under which we live. And to teach us how to feel the creeps." For Prinz, Gert accomplished this by herself representing specters that were "nevertheless highly actual and highly living" and thus portraying ideas that were "always more actual and living than the more or less shallow, hazy and chancey world of things and appearances." From this, Prinz came to the conclusion that,

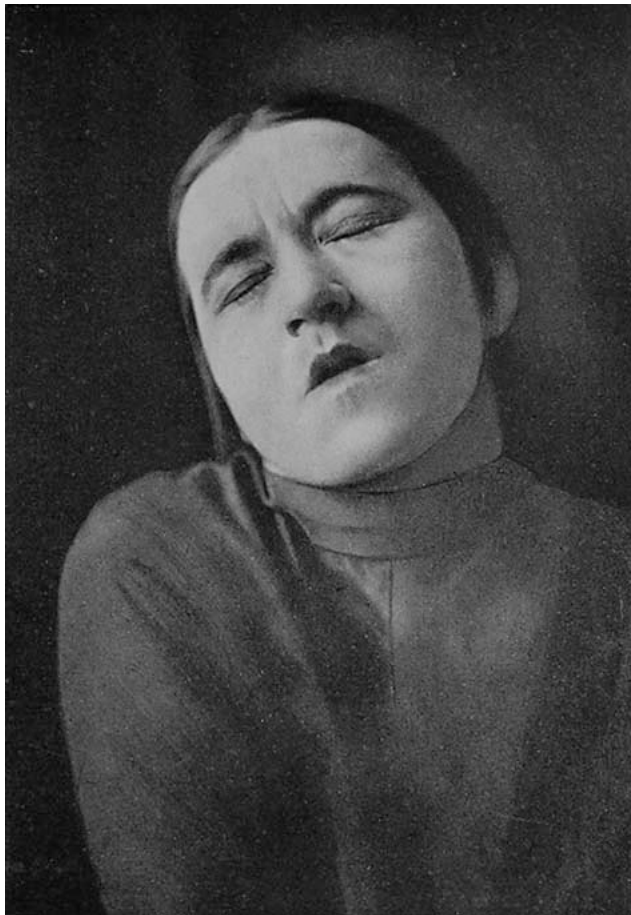


Figure 4. Valeska Gert "dances" Death in 1925. (Photo by Suse Byk, reprinted in *Mein Weg* [1930] by Valeska Gert)

“What she represents is the semblance of the semblance [*der Schein des Scheins*]¹⁶—and nevertheless the single truth behind the hundred-fold lies, which spread out every evening in the light of the spotlight” (1930:18). Like Nietzsche’s chorus of satyrs, the “fictitious creatures of nature” who present “a truer, more real, more complete image of existence [...] than [...] cultured man who generally thinks of himself as the only reality” ([1870] 1999:39, 41), Gert’s appearance as a fictitious creature rendered her more capable of offering genuine truth.

Inadvertent Danse Macabre

Whereas Prinz viewed the layering of semblance as an active construction on Gert’s part, narratives about Berber are more contradictory. Berber’s artistry was often treated passively, as something that happened to her rather than a willful choice—for example, the incident when her husband witnessed her collapse, unable to distinguish the actual from the display.¹⁶ Whether Berber truly was in control of her performances may always remain unclear because the scandals surrounding her left historical documentation that forms its own secondary layer of illusion. The historical record alternates between reports of her hyper-self-consciousness—characterized by a “strained, chintzy suaveness” (Ihering [1921] 1958:406) that renders her inauthentic in contrast to the true expressions of other contemporaneous dancers—and tabloid accounts of her as out of control. Berber’s wildness coexisted alongside observations of how consciously aware she was of her effect, despite her soft and indefinite gestures onstage (Suhr 1922:38). However, very few observed the contradiction in those perceptions, apart from one 1928 eulogy that proclaimed, “Anita Berber danced vice and experienced it. Herself a heavy morphine- and cocaine-user, she danced intoxication and ravings, portrayed nausea and horror—with an art, which no one had the courage to acclaim as art” (Müller 1928).

Berber’s intentional aestheticization of her sickness is taken up by Toepfer, who suggests she anticipated postmodern sensibility in “an almost satiric critique of the pretensions to a healthy, modern identity that body eurhythmic consciousness and *Nacktkultur* sought to achieve” (1997:91). It has also been argued that her nudity, rather than being erotic, “exposed the physically and emotionally bared self [...]; Berber] used nudity onstage to remove rather than construct artifice” (Funkenstein 2005:27–28). However, the subsequent conclusion that associated expressive codes of signification ultimately “gave an authenticity to her staged productions” (28) overlooks how Berber also undermined those conventions by both eliding and estranging her physical and emotional expressivity. Berber was both in control of and controlled by her mortality; her sicknesses made her performances more artistically authoritative and publicly valuable at the same time that they undermined that artistic authority and her physical capacities. Her spectacle of the real arose as she sought to create an illusion of estranged physicality at the same time that her enactment collapsed that display back onto itself.

Despite three years of ballet training under Rita Sacchetto, with whom Gert also studied, Berber’s early dances showed a disunity in which her body was something other or alien. As described above, her early stage appearances challenged the ideal expressionistic gesture because they lacked a “liberated majesty”; rather, Nikolaus felt that the liberation involved in her dance was something certain, with the spiritual result a factor of her conscious calculations (1919:78). Berber had begun to take drugs near the height of Germany’s period of economic inflation, and her work intensified—as did public impressions, which conflated her life and art. One review of a 1922 concert that includes *Cocaine* claimed: “Her ‘dance’ is a product of decay [...] between radiating symbols of life-affirmance and the longing for death.” Such mortality was made palpably visible: “The style of her degeneracy, which she reveals with great sincerity, manifests

16. Such a narrative generally guides research into Berber by situating her as a victim of psychological diseases, fate, and so forth. Two books published in 2006—Lothar Fischer’s sympathetic perspective and Mel Gordon’s sensational one—both write Berber as a troubled woman whose staged art was often supplementary to her scandalous life.

itself with her naked flesh” (in Gordon 2006:103). According to Mel Gordon, when another piece from that night, *Morphium*, was presented again four years later, Berber manifested her personal exploits with even more extreme physicality: “Here, a less wistful and plain-clothed Anita moved in jerks and disconnected jumps. It was a more truthful display of the narcotic’s toxic effect on her body” (152).

Cocaine and *Morphium* were identified as Berber’s most important artistic creations because she demonstrated in them her ability to “subordinate herself to the form of the dances, without disowning herself” (Jenčik [1930] 1931:10), and yet her relationship to those pieces and the “realistic perception” that reviewers identified (Joachimstal 1925) was dependent upon personal subordination to the material that formed the subject of those dances. If a star’s authenticity is established or constructed in media texts “by the use of markers that indicate lack of control, lack of premeditation and privacy” (Dyer 1991:137), then the self-inflicted vivisection, the “unprofessional surgical operation” that Berber performed, was certainly a part of this authentic construction. It seems no accident that Berber’s solo *Cocaine* was set to *La Danse Macabre* Op.40 (1875), a “dance of death” by composer Camille Saint-Saëns. By combining conventional stylized dance movement in a “campy spectacle of moral corruption” (Schnog 1925:46) with an authenticating extra-theatrical lifestyle, *Cocaine* evidenced both a distancing of display and enactment as well as a collapse, foreshadowing their complete unity when the actual breakdown of the dancer’s body eclipsed her spectacle of the real.

According to Jenčik’s account, *Cocaine* began with Berber unconscious on the floor and proceeded through a battle for life, in which “the healthy body fights with the poisoned one which rages in turn in the healthy,” making her appear like “a puppet in the cruel play between poison and action of the heart.” This fight manifested in spasms that shook her limbs independently of each other, until the dancer was caused to stand mechanically up from her “bizarre tangle of flesh.” Finally, the “body of the dancer hurled to the floor in a monstrous cascade” ([1930] 1931:10). How much was actively portrayed in the movement versus the author’s own experience is unclear, but the description’s repeated references to puppetry and activities of “the body” rather than “the dancer” suggested fierce physical activity that Berber possibly was not aware of;¹⁷ this reinforced how the performance was witnessed in terms of physical agency, both authenticated and undermined by its proximity to death.

I have become aware of the trend for discussions of plastic art works to invoke tropes of animation in contrast to live performance’s frequent fascinations with death, as in Phelan and Blau. It is natural to fantasize about one’s other, or use that other in order to establish a dialectical inquiry. However, the historically specific performances of death complicate this issue. Siegmund argues that, “Dance appears predestined for social articulation of death, because it incessantly dies and disappears before our eyes” (2006:34). But if all dance is haunted by the death of time, then live performances of death seem to pose a unique problem in their status as a fundamentally animate medium into which rigor mortis can never set. In *The Green Table*, the sustained dancing partially dispelled the threat of death, whereas physical failure and the ultimate possibility of permanent stasis concluded both *Death* and *Cocaine*, in vertical and horizontal form respectively.

Both death and dance were incredibly powerful topoi of physical authenticity in the Weimar Republic; however, their combination complicated the material authority they were seen to share, as evident in the examples of Jooss, Gert, and Berber. By invoking mortality as a means to communicate a reality—that Berlin’s dance partner might really be death—each of these three performances were by necessity thrown into a sphere of illusion or phantasm. Such spectacles could only be maintained so long as they occurred in the oscillation between enactment and display. When one entirely overpowered the other, as with Berber’s premature death at age 29,

17. “Der Körper” is used 12 times in this way, as opposed to “Die Tänzerin,” which appears only five.

the performances became something other than theatrical events. The question I keep returning to is: Why risk that slippage? Why at the convergence of aesthetic, philosophical, and cultural trends—all of which valorized the body as a plastic site of meaning production and knowledge—would these performers attempt a mode of performance where the physical authenticity was both material and an act of illusion? Why, when for the first time in its history, dance no longer needed a story beyond the dramaturgy of the body itself, would these artists choose to invoke that expressive capacity by potentially undermining its very authority? Hartman suggests the existence of a realm of the inauthentic so close to that of the authentic that they cannot be distinguished “except by an intuitive and assertive act of faith” (2002:98). Perhaps these dances of death can likewise be considered *acts* of faith that intentionally turned the real into spectacle in order to offer more authentic truths.

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