Sabine Huschka, Barbara Gronau (eds.)

ENERGY AND FORCES AS AESTHETIC INTERVENTIONS

Politics of Bodily Scenarios

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Energy and Forces as Aesthetic Interventions
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This volume collects academic as well as artistic explorations highlighting historical and contemporary approaches to the ›energetic‹ in its aesthetic and political potential. Energetic processes cross dance, performance art and installations. In contemporary dance and performance art, energetic processes are no longer mere conditions of form but appear as distinct aesthetic interventions. They transform the body, evoke specific states and push towards intensities.

International contributors (i.e. Gerald Siegmund, Susan Leigh Foster, Lucia Ruprecht) unfold thorough investigations, elucidating maneuvers of mobilization, activation, initiation, regulation, navigation and containment of forces as well as different potentials and promises associated with the ›energetic‹.

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Energy and Forces as Aesthetic Interventions
An Introduction

Sabine Huschka and Barbara Gronau

In the meantime, I am talking less about states than about energies. Does something have its own energy and, if so, how do I get access to it? How can we channel energy and bring it into a form? The body is not a piano! (Meg Stuart 2018)

The recourse to the energetic in the performing arts appears in various constellations and has become increasingly differentiated in recent decades. Whether in theatre, dance or performance art, within the concept of energy and its expression in forces, the immaterial and medial conditions of artistic representation are always accompanied by the attempt to grasp their effects. Talking about energy means considering a key cultural term that reveals decisive upheavals in people’s understandings. Especially in contemporary theatre, energetic processes form the very centre of artistic practice, and they pervade dance, performance art and theatre: Bodies and constellations are transformed through them, specific states and forces are evoked, and intensive or even collective effects are produced. It can be observed that, since the beginning of modernity, energetic states acquired their own aesthetic relevance and meaning. The energetic is now no longer the mere condition of forms, but rather maintains the function of aesthetic interventions themselves.

This volume investigates the aesthetic potential of the energetic. It explores the contemporary, historical, aesthetic and praxeological approaches to “energy” by discussing concepts of this dazzling figure of thought and discourse, which itself considers the energetic between overwhelming experience, cosmic grounding, and transformational force. Their consequent
observations and analyses raise central questions, such as: what exactly is revealed by the energetic as an aesthetic potential? What transgressive potential can an artistic work unfurl upon forces?

When energy is defined as »force, energy [Tatkraft], efficiency, as well as force of character, insistence, [... and as] the capability to do work« at the beginning of the 20th century (Meyer’s great encyclopedia of conversations 1908: 774), two concepts can be recognized: the ancient dynamis on the one hand, and the concept of force developed by Newtonian physics on the other. In addition to their capability of shaping, force describes each of the nature's changes in state and interactions, the intensity of which is measurable. They thus refer to a generative dimension of nature – which, as used in reference to willpower here – will also be extended to cultural and social constellations. Under the influence of thermodynamics and the theory of relativity, the concept of energy in modernity was transformed into a purely abstract variable of state, even though its numerous concrete manifestations remain perceptible and measurable.

The realization that these diverse forms of energy could be converted led the philosopher Fritz Mauthner to the realization that there is »more unity than could be previously fathomed in world events« (Mauthner 1923: 409). As a result, energy is now considered to be a universal quantity, alongside space and time, in the natural sciences. When discussing concepts of energy and power in the arts, the principles of form and performance, as well as those of interaction and transgression, appear to be of more particular importance than others.

As the energetic has rarely been developed as an aesthetic category in dance and theatre studies, it lacks any analytical and theoretical transparency about which scholars could come to a mutual understanding. This volume therefore proposes new discursive approaches, with which it will become possible to analyze performances, scenic performances, or dance techniques as aesthetic structures, based upon their energetic qualities and figurations. Of particular interest to this inquiry are those practices that convert the body's gift of moving itself into an aesthetic work containing energies and forces, following the intense desire for transgression, intensification and transformation. The contributions included in this volume thus explore not only real strategies but also the utopian possibilities of such aesthetic interventions, which oscillate between critique and longing for transgression and harmony, respectively.
When energetic processes in dance and performance art are qualified as the mobilization, activation, initiation, regulation, guidance and containment of forces, what consequently follows is that not only aesthetic, but also ecological, economic and political relations come up for debate. On the one hand, this concerns the ways in which the energetic becomes perceivable via staged, experimental or choreographic arrangements. On the other hand, this also concerns the interactive relations of exchange between subjects and objects. Moreover, within every execution of movement reside political and economic corporeal ideas of power and exhaustion, of form and transgression, and of giving and taking. The energetic – as the contributions in this volume demonstrate – is therefore the main focus of debate in the performing arts even above all other politics of perception and corporeality.

The collected contributions presented here originate from the artistic-academic symposium »Energetic Forces as Aesthetic Interventions«, which was held in June 2018 at the Inter-University Center for Dance (Hochschulübergreifendes Zentrum Tanz, HZT) in Berlin, and was attended by international scholars and artists. The symposium was organized in cooperation with the DFG research project Transgressions: Energization of Bodies and Scenes, which was conducted in cooperation with the Faculty of Performing Arts of Berlin University of the Arts (Fakultät Darstellende Kunst der Universität der Künste Berlin). The symposium offered the chance for dance and theatre scholars, alongside choreographers Kat Válastur and Margrét Sara Guðjónsdóttir, to engage in intensive discussions regarding how energetic processes can transform into aesthetic forces, and which potentiality can be attributed to these aesthetic interventions.

This productive, shared space for thinking was located between praxeological, aesthetic and discourse-analytical perspectives, and it demonstrated the inherent connections of historical and contemporary approaches and conceptions of the energetic, alongside the body-political questions that became apparent during the symposium’s lectures, lecture demonstrations and workshops. As one physical reverberation of the symposium, this volume therefore presents two artist’s statements and interviews, in addition to scholarly contributions from the fields of dance, theatre and cultural studies. The wide horizon of positions and discussion formats assembled in this volume encompass questions of which functions and promises might go hand in hand with the energetic as an aesthetic force.
field, as well as how these energizations can be described and analyzed in dance and performance.

This volume thus advocates a necessary strengthening of discourse in dance studies, as well as approaches to the interdisciplinary exchange with theatre studies, in which a resonating space between theoretical and practical forms of knowledge might be achieved. The nationally and internationally renowned academic voices assembled here therefore claim a politically relevant field of discourse regarding energy and power, while also providing a heuristic contouring of their aesthetic, analytical and historical perspective. The socio-political resonances of bodies are illuminated in various performances. Overheated, endangered and tired bodies can be found in 24 Hour Happening (1965) with Joseph Beuys, Bazon Brock and Wolf Vostell et al., in Valie Export’s Hyperbulie (1973), in 10000 Gestures (2017) by Boris Charmatz or the series Men in the Cities by Robert Longo. In addition, this can also be found in the interplay of body and energy in the practices of ballet and somatics, as well as in contact improvisation such as the movement-training practice of Gaga created by the Israeli choreographer Ohad Naharin. In addition, the essays in this volume also examine; Isadora Duncan, Martha Graham and Toni Bentley’s historical discourses of the energetic; Rudolf von Laban’s praxeological movement theories of the energetic; Randy Martin’s sociological drafts of the aesthetic and mobilizing force of dance; Christoph Menke’s aesthetic theories of force; and Alfred North Whitehead and Gilbert Simondon’s (natural) philosophical ideas on the cosmological, particularly in the context of debates on posthumanism. This multitude of approaches is organized into the following four areas:

**Practices, Discourses and Politics of the ›Energetic‹**

The volume opens with a contribution by Barbara Gronau on the cultural-historical process of gaining perspective on the sites of energetic processes. In response to the question *How to Talk About Energy?* Gronau emphasizes the importance of the performing arts as a practice of production and that of making energetic processes perceptible. The contribution develops central aspects of discourses on energy within the performing arts during the 20th and 21st centuries, alongside three specific characteristics: the performers’ handling of their own bodies, the search for new ways to impact and affect
the audience, and the interrogation of the very concept of »artistic work«. Gronau thereby also simultaneously defines scenic realizations as epistemic constellations in which the energetic appears as a figure of knowledge generated by theatrical and discursive techniques. By combining body concepts and economic discourses, Gronau simultaneously emphasizes the necessity of a transdisciplinary location for the concept of energy. Finally, in contrast to the entropy model, the balancing or transgression of forces in performances can be read as actual work on energetic states.

In her contribution *Dancing the Energy/Energizing the Dancing*, SUSAN LEIGH FOSTER examines the interdependent interplay of body and energy within various dance practices. The analytical question of *how energy is conceptualized* focuses on movement techniques and practices in ballet, somatics, and contact improvisation as examples of embodied theories of physical energies and their subsequent operations. How energy is addressed verbally or physically, which interactions between the dancing bodies are promoted or inhibited, and which aesthetic ideals materialize through energetic processes, are all manifested through different policies of perception. These, interestingly enough, manifest themselves as generally variable body politics connected to the physical labor that is an integral part of dancing: the aim is either to aesthetically render the invisibility of power, or to make the power and energy that is nevertheless always physically demanded visible. At the same time, Foster reveals analogies between contemporary forms of training that – regardless of their stylistic aesthetic difference – are aimed at establishing an efficiency and optimization strategy of the energetic household of dancing bodies. On the basis of an incorporated anatomical-biomechanical knowledge and imagination-supported procedures, increasingly virtuosic and fluctuating but, at the same time economizing, approaches are applied to the energetic potential of the body, which is regarded as inexhaustible and valuable. In terms of choreographic analyses, Foster concludes that investigations of energetic processes reveal valuable aspects of the production of meaning, as their modes of production and distribution refer to the construction of physical identities in dance and its processes.

In her contribution *Aesthetic Scenarios of Energeia: Bodies as Transformational Fields of Force*, SABINE HUSCHKA interrogates contemporary choreographers’ interest in applying themselves to aesthetic work with energy. Some
thoroughly diverging aesthetic conceptions and interrogated discourse fig-
urations of energy (i.e. Meg Stuart, Doris Uhlich, Boris Charmatz, Merce
Cunningham and Margrét Sara Guðjónsdóttir) reveal a conspicuous desire
for transgression that, in contrast to our life-worldly disposition of rampant
exhaustion, deems the body to be its own unique reservoir of strength. This
calls upon a transgressive, transformational and transforming potential
of movement, which ignites aesthetic work on movements’ initiation mo-
ments occurring at the very limits of the body. Building upon this idea, and
in dialogue with scholarly perspectives on the political potential of energy
(Foster, Lepecki), as well as with philosophical figures of thought regarding
transgression (Foucault), Huschka notes a fundamental characteristic of the
dance-aesthetic work on *energeia*: namely indicating the creation of aesthetic
fields of transgression, which allow one to conceive of the body as a utopian
instance. Movement scenarios of *energeia* thus pass the political potential for
action over to the body.

In a discourse-analytical investigation of female dancers’ autobiographies,
Christina Thurner unfolds the way in which the energetic as an aesthetic
figuration of dance gains significance. Beginning with Isadora Duncan’s
modern concept of offering the dancing body as an aesthetic form ground-
ed in an »original source of all movement«, Thurner examines historically
determinative discourse figurations. As formulated experiences, narratives
and phenomena, these establish a dynamic discursive field of the energetic.
Methodologically, Thurner strives for a critical reading of the genre of autobi-
ography, which has so far been only uncritically addressed as source material
in scholarly research. Relying on Isadora Duncan’s *Memoirs (Memoiren)*, Toni
Bentley’s *Dancer’s Journal*, and Martha Graham’s *Blood Memory*, she works
out three formative aesthetic figurations of the energetic. (1) Graham and
Duncan focus on specific scenes of the *activation and mobilization* of forces,
which emerge in various ways from the relationship between the body and
the world. As a result, two different configurations of the interplay of energy
and body become recognizable, which can, in some instances, be understood
as a vitalistic principle (Graham), while at other times it can be interpret-
ed as the physical reverberation of a perception translated into movement
(Duncan). (2) As an aesthetic scene, the energetic also calls for processes of
*regulating and directing forces*. As Thurner makes clear, these correspond to
a final figuration: (3) namely the reflection of perceptions of *physical ener-
...gy consumption traversed by real experiences of exhaustion. Striking differences in modern aesthetic concepts can be identified here. While Duncan understands the spectrum of sensations bundled within her as a continuous transposition of the energetic, and thus designs her own dancing entropically, Graham and Bentley are confronted with the impending exhaustion of their own forces, which construes the energetic of their dancing as a fire now flickering and dying.

**The ›Energetic‹ as Aesthetic: Philosophical Approaches**

Two contributions in this volume present concise theoretical frames that address the aesthetic obstinacy of the energetic and interrogate its philosophical figurations. Against the background of a differentiation of Energetic Forces as Aesthetic Forces, GERALD SIEGMUND works out the anthropologically divided nature of energetic forces. Their aesthetic power shows itself in an always already-given double movement, i.e. by constantly undoing what they simultaneously produce. Energetic forces blatantly refer to the understanding of man as a divided being, which Michel Foucault described as the historical doubling of man upon his entry into modernity: from then on, the thinking of him and of himself moves in a split sphere, which opens a space for not-knowing within knowledge itself. According to Siegmund, in light of this phenomenological »ontology of the un-thought«, dance opens up precisely this dimension of aesthetic-thinking, which allows us to rediscover another side of existence. This includes: forces, pulsations and energies that, being outside our cognitive selves, allow us to discover something that we could not yet have conceived of on our own.

Siegmund thus points to an aesthetic dimension of energetic forces, to which he attributes special qualities: energy mobilizes, activates and regulates the body, and simultaneously integrates it into a process in which energy is formed, connected, separated and released. Through his engagement with the American dance scholar Randy Martin, Siegmund expands Martin’s understanding of dance, according to which dance lends itself to a mobilizing force that is socially and politically effective. Siegmund confronts Martin’s work with the aesthetic theory of the German philosopher Christoph Menke, and in so doing advocates an explicitly aesthetic dimension of the mobilizing force. Through the decay of form, the aesthetic dimension of the
mobilizing force effectively crafts the aesthetic subject as something transgressive: a subject that emerges across disciplines and transcends its own practice through its duplicated double. For Siegmund, this indicates the location of the potential of dance, namely: using mobilizing forces to give space to a desire that could offer a reprieve from neo-liberal economic models. The aesthetic potential of this energetic therefore accomplishes transgressions and transformations of subjectivity and knowledge.

In addition to an anthropological aesthetic, Maximilian Haas argues alongside Alfred North Whitehead and Gilbert Simondon for a natural-philosophically informed *Cosmology of Forces*, which provides an understanding of theater as a set of *Performative Fields*. In light of recent dance and performance productions that programmatically stage non-human actors – including machines, algorithms, animals, plants, or simply mere objects – Haas subjects the networked ensembles of bodies, media, and objects to a philosophical perspective, which itself reveals their peculiar ecology of events, processes, and practices to be an aesthetic-cosmological force field of particular quality. Haas does not regard their aesthetic power as a performative event generated by bodies and performers and then made effective in the theatre. Rather, he thinks of it as a dynamic force field, which produces all theatrical elements and unfolds their effects. A cosmological theory of the aesthetic is thus projected, which interprets theatre as a situational ontogenesis of its performative events; a becoming of form via distributed forces within the performative logic of the field.

If Haas understands forces as a multitude or an infinity in which they mutually define and specify each other without ever bringing the other to a standstill, then he also thereby sketches a form of aesthetic thought about performance itself. This brings relationality and processuality to the fore as the relationship between an individual and its milieu as co-constitutive and emergent as well as rooted in specific constellations of forces producing particular effects. In this way, Haas projects a cosmological order of forces, following the thought of mathematician and pragmatist philosopher Alfred North Whitehead, and French philosopher of science and technology Gilbert Simondon. While Simondon develops a historical understanding of force, originating in 19th century electrodynamics and magnetism, and transforms it into a cosmological design of ontogenetic processes, Whitehead applies the cosmological method as a mode of speculative philosophy. Haas discuss-
es both of these theories, as well as their potential value for a conception of performativity, with which the processual emerges as a distributed interplay of forces, in addition to becoming recognizable as a conception of activity. These forces regulate relationships and are actually both constitutive of reality as well as still remaining transgressive.

**Forces in Transgression**

In her chapter *Gesture, Energy, Critique*, LUCIA RUPRECHT explores an important body-political dimension of the energetic. She emphasizes the gesture's aesthetic power of intervention as the rhythmic figuration for an interruption of the energetic. By analytically juxtaposing Robert Longo's series of images *Men in the Cities* and Boris Charmatz's group choreography *10000 Gestures (10000 Gesten)*, Ruprecht attempts to examine their repertoire of played-out gestures. She does this on the basis of a modernist understanding of the gestural, relying on the work of Bertolt Brecht and Walter Benjamin. A dialectic therefore operates within the gesture, which oscillates between kinetically stored and potential energies. Due to the gesture's capability of punctuating movement through temporarily frozen moments of posture, it has a distinct expressiveness of critical-political potential. As Ruprecht emphasizes, the gesture is accompanied by expression and reflection, with which the energetic gains aesthetic power. Ruprecht demonstrates how aesthetic figurations of the gestural can play out by analyzing Longo's monumental images. Longo's affective arrangement of tumbling bodies operates in the very face of death, and serves as a monument of energetic forces, thus allowing energetic poses to emerge. On the other hand, Charmatz's exuberant repertoire in *10000 Gestures* is dedicated to an energetic-expressive force of incessant movements, which are applied to the hectic negotiation of our over-committed bodies. An ambivalent expenditure of energy is played out here, in which the subject constantly bends to the imperative of gestural productivity and – even while feeding off of it – also throws himself out of itself. It is precisely in this situation that Ruprecht locates the critical intervention of *10000 Gestures*: in the »mastering« of the relentless creativity of neoliberal capitalism via the magic of emptying oneself right before one's eyes.

The American researcher MEGHAN QUINLAN applies a critical cultural analysis to the popularity of Israeli choreographer Ohad Naharin's »move-
ment language« Gaga, and investigates whether it might not in fact be con-
sidered as a practice of *Training Neoliberal Dancers*. Deriving her methodology
from ethnographic research, Quinlan works out the politics of mediation in
the Gaga classes. She reveals its principles of inventing movements, of struc-
turing improvisation, and of self-choreographing in the sense of negotiating
bodily techniques in one’s own body – with reference to Randy Martin – as
a *Metatechnique*. Gaga develops a striking activation of constantly changing
energy and force fields in the body, which physically and mentally promote
and demand a willingness to transgress the boundaries of controlled mechan-
isms and situations, as well as the limits of one’s existing movement abil-
ities. Thematically this is a functional service of the energetic, which trains
the body via a blurring of the pedagogical norms customary to the teaching
of technique, choreography and improvisation. The body thus becomes a
malleable agent of constant transformations and – as Quinlan points out – it
is formed according to the unique economies of the neoliberal dance market,
which demand a physically, emotionally and mentally flexible, as well as es-
pecially innovative, dancer. In contrast to Gaga’s explicit self-understanding,
Quinlan interprets Gaga as a technique that is not intended to provide shape
training to the dancer’s body. She rather sees it as a teaching strategy of
self-formation in terms of decision-making, to which already-learned body
techniques will be transferred as regulated processes of internal negotiation.
This raises critical perspectives that reveal the inherent power structures of
the energetic, as found within strategies for activating movement forces, as
well as in manoeuvres of guiding, accumulating, and economizing physical
processes.

**Susanne Franco** goes into great detail tracing Rudolf Laban’s extensive re-
search about analyzing the expressive-energetic quality spectrum of physical
movement. She particularly examines the extent to which energetic forces
could be colonized as an interdependency of human movements, as located
between strategies of optimization and their individual usage for free de-
ployment. Franco’s essay *Energy, Eukinetics, and Effort. Rudolf Laban’s Vision
of Work and Dance* sheds light on Laban’s analysis and theoretical models for
the qualification, notation and training of efficient movement sequences,
which remains fundamental even today. Franco therefore examines Laban’s
systems in the context of their historical development or their culturally
contemporaneous social, philosophical and psychological theories. She also
locates them in terms of the societal perception of (physical) labor (Karl Ludwig Klages, Fritz Giese, Karl Bücher). In this way, Franco draws attention to Laban’s central, differentiating phase of work on his movement theory, ultimately referred to as Effort Theory, which emerged during his exile in England in the 1940s due to his research on industrial movement processes. In the 1920s Laban developed several models – choreutics and eukinetics – which offer a classification of movement qualities and their dynamics (flow). In collaboration with economist Frederick Charles Lawrence, Laban later continued this work by contouring a movement training course for female workers. Franco argues that this was aimed at establishing the rhythmic principle of working movements – a thesis that challenges the basic movement analytical approach of the American Frederic W. Taylor. Laban’s Effort Theory offers a physical way of thinking about movement as a purposefully applicable form of energetic force, in which knowledge of transformation and of one’s inner intention is reflected.

Artistic Perspectives on Somatic Interventions

The volume concludes with artistic contributions from two choreographers reflecting upon their danced-somatic approaches to the energetic. They discuss this and their own movement practices, alongside personal experiences and socio-political questions. In a conversation between Icelandic choreographer Margrét Sara Guðjónsdóttir and Sweden-based Performance Researcher Susan Kozel, Guðjónsdóttir explains in detail her somatic dance practice »Full Drop into the Body«, which she developed over many years. Within the context of a completely »burnt out body’s« experience of intensely physical exhaustion, Guðjónsdóttir surrendered to a conscious practice of complete surrender, which initiated a conscious listening to her own inner rhythms. This practice of non-doing opens up a unique rhythmic world of movement, which emerges as the constant and unwilling activation of one’s own body. Through many years of practice, Guðjónsdóttir developed a listening access to the energetic sources of the body, letting it move, first only for herself, but eventually also for other experienced dancers. This sharing led her to apply this practice choreographically and effectively in various phases: in 2014-2015 the Blind Spotting Performance Series exhibited the burnt out, broken, exhausted, apathetic, imploding body in a achievement-
oriented society. Strikingly set in front of red velvet theatre curtains, these performances were designed to provide as a stage for the critical antihero. Guðjónsdóttir’s ongoing choreographies *Conspiracy Ceremony – HYPERSONIC STATES* (November 2017) and *Pervasive Magnetic Stimuli* (2018) continue this intensive movement research, which targets the unconscious forces that fulfill us.

In her choreographic work, the Berlin-based choreographer Kat Válastur continues this investigation in her study of *The Poetics of a Morphing Body*. In this chapter, she traces her own artistic engagement with the forces that attack, pervade and deform the body in our technological reality. She also explains her choreographic questions and their challenges to dance in great detail. For example, in *GLAND* (2014), Válastur exposed her body to a fluctuating gravitational field, constructed aesthetically with movement, which sought to interrogate the very spatiality of forces themselves. The group choreography *Ah! Oh! A Contemporary Ritual* (2014) presented a post-apocalyptic scenario. In this destructive ‘landscape’ the dancers – who are filled up with foreign forces, represented here by a tremendous quantity of data – seek to initiate ritualized force fields. They thus position themselves in space as mutating circular formations. The ongoing solo choreographed piece *Rasp Your Soul* (2017) misplaces a dancer’s body in the midst of an archaic landscape.

The aforementioned mutating digital data volumes have long since penetrated this body space, in order to henceforth forge a path to what is outside. This work represents a change in Válastur’s choreographic perspective: it now includes the initiation of a movement-aesthetic process of the protrusion of foreign forces towards the inside, as becomes visible through a process of morphing.

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**Works Cited**

