



## WRITING THEATER

Qualitative Methods, Situated Knowledge, and the Making of Performance

Munich, July 5–7, 2023

Organized by Ulf Otto, Luise Barsch, Anna Raisich

### Abstracts

---

#### Wednesday, July 5, 2023

##### **13.30–14.45 KEYNOTE I**

##### **Translating Practice to Research. Methodological Aspects of Praxeological Performance Research**

Gabriele Klein, Hamburg University, DE/University of Amsterdam, NL

How can one research about, with and in the so-called “ephemeral arts” such as dance and performance? What translation steps are necessary to explore the practice of this corporeal, mobile, situational, aesthetic production of knowledge?

These questions have accompanied dance studies and performance studies since their beginnings. They have led to the elaboration of various methodological procedures, methodological approaches, and theoretical concepts, which are fed by interdisciplinary sources and here above all by social science methodologies. In addition, artistic research has expanded these methodological procedures established in the scientific context.

One methodology that links artistic and scientific research, but also highlights their differences, is practice theory. Its most important principles form the basis for the “praxeological production analysis”, that will be outlined in this lecture.

##### **15.00–16.30 POSITIONALITIES: BODIES IN RESEARCH (I)**

##### **Positioning, Orientation, Relationalization. Doing Research on Disability Performance as a Multimodal Process**

Elena Backhausen, Mirjam Kreuser and Benjamin Wihstutz, Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, DE

The research project “Disability Performance as Human Differentiation. Presentations of Deviance and Capacity in Historical Transformation” (CRC 1482, JGU Mainz) investigates the relationship between capacity (Leistung) and disability in performance cultures and combines perspectives and methods of performance studies, disability studies and ethnography. Methodologically, we are concerned with the question how to avoid the marginalization of disabled and crip/queer perspectives in performance research and how to reflect (self-)positioning and situated knowledge within the research and writing process. In this context, it is not only important to question the normative settings of conventional ethnography regarding actors in the field and interviewees, but also to re-think an overly rigid understanding of self-positioning on the part of the researchers. In this spirit, research practice can be regarded as an open process in terms of fluid and contingent encounters, orientations, and changing positions and be reflected upon as such in writing (Robertson 2002, Koutouan 2022).

In reference to our research practice as a diverse team with various, historically connected fields of research (Sideshow, Paralympics, Disability Arts) and within a larger interdisciplinary research environment (CRC Human Differentiation), we would like to follow up on recent critical perspectives on the normative imprinting of performance analysis (Warstat 2020, Hoesch/Wihstutz 2020, Kolesch/Schütz 2020, Sharifi/Skwirblies 2022, Kalu/Sharifi 2022, Kreuser 2023), disability history (Bösl/Klein 2010, Nolte 2020) and interview-based research (Ahmed 2012, Kerschbaum/Price 2017). It is our understanding of disability performance research as a multimodal process to develop ways to include (self)positionings and one's own movement, relationalizations (Schillmeier 2008) and (dis)orientations (Ahmed 2006, McRuer 2006, 2020, Price 2011, 2016) by and while doing research.

## **17.00–18.15 KEYNOTE II**

### **The Power of Fragility: A Pragmatist Approach to Performance**

Albena Yaneva, University of Manchester, UK

Responding to a growing concern that Art History is gradually becoming a synonym of *Bildwissenschaft*, art studies embraced a recent turn known as the 'New Sociology of Art' that strays away from the mere interpretation of the meaning and symbolism of artworks. Shifting attention from the meticulous autopsy of the original and its questioning through the lens of photographic-founded knowledge, it no longer replaces artworks with their images that serve as a basis of interpretation of symbolic meanings.

In this lecture, I will reflect on the methods of the New Sociology of Art. This pragmatist approach turns attention to the practices of production and perception, the materiality of the works themselves and their specifically aesthetic properties and effects. Refuting the dualistic conception of 'art and society', it investigates all the 'intermediaries' between the work of art and the broader context subsumed under the concept 'society': studios, critics, artists, techniques and technologies, artistic associations, clients and publics, and the heterogeneous, partial and encased assemblage of humans, relationships, associations and institutions.

Drawing on specific comparative examples from contemporary art and design, I will advocate a pragmatist approach to theater performance. Three aspects will be discussed in details: first, the uncertainty around the nature of objects and technologies in performance and how they facilitate and mediate multiple actions and transactions; second, the uncertainty around the nature of creative action, its fragility and modes of distribution; third, the uncertainty surrounding the nature of groupings (artistic, technical, associations, audiences) and the various mechanisms of enrolling into groups and crafting feedback.

**Thursday, July 6, 2023**

## **09.15–10.45 POSITIONALITIES: BODIES IN RESEARCH (II)**

### **The Body as Research Instrument? – Methodological Reflections and Empirical Insights from an Ethnographic Theater Study**

Hanna Voss, Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, DE

Comparing established writing strategies in the field of theater studies, which have traditionally focused on the analysis of performances, with ethnographic approaches reveals both methodological overlaps and fundamental differences. On the one hand, this affects the willingness to be co-present and to transfer what has not yet been verbalized into speech and writing. On the other hand, in addition to a different duration and temporal engagement of research, ethnographic approaches and performance

analysis are based on different concepts of culture and of familiarity or unfamiliarity/foreignness of the subject of research; moreover they aim at analyzing (and at the same time constructing) a multitude of aesthetic orders versus one social order. Being co-present both in performance analysis and ethnography the researcher not only engages in certain techniques and with material agents but the researcher's body is the most fundamental and important instrument of research. Whereas this basic condition is primarily reflected in the sense of individual or shared knowledge, ways of perception and experiences in German-speaking theater studies – more recently, accompanied by discussions concerning the need of a multi-perspective performance analysis and an increased attention to identity politics and its implications for research –, from an ethnographical perspective ascriptive features such as age, gender or ethnicity and their influence on field access, possibilities of observation and gaining knowledge are also reflected.

Against this backdrop and looking back at my own ethnographic study of the 'production' of professional artists (i.e., training, placing, hiring, casting, etc.) in the organizational field of German-speaking theater (Sprechtheater), I want to reflect on the potentials and limits of my own research instrument as a white scholar who tries to investigate the conditions of relevance or irrelevance of ethnicity – one among other body based human differentiations (Humandifferenzierungen) – and relating processes of structural in- and exclusion.

### **Who Am I? And If So, How Many, Where, and Why? – Autoethnographic Reflection on Field Diaries from Theater Rehearsals**

Tamara Quick, University of Bayreuth, DE

Ethnographic research approaches have enjoyed great interdisciplinary interest for some years now. Thus, methodological approaches from anthropology and the social sciences are increasingly demanding their place in the methodological portfolio of modern theater studies (Quick 2020), and they do so on different epistemological levels: on the one hand, regarding a recalibrated perspective on watching and listening, on observation and reception, which dissolves the classical separation between stage and audience. I suggest that, in theater ethnographies, the medium of theater is questioned beyond its entertainment or educational character, in a praxeological and phenomenological sense. On the other hand, there is an intensified interest in the processes of genesis and creation in theater within the framework of ethnographic rehearsal research, in order to explore artistic practices more holistically (Quick 2023). The theater rehearsal, with its artistic, social, and administrative-operational dynamics, is repeatedly the subject of ethnographic research (Matzke 2012; Hinz and Roselt 2011; McAuley 2012), and, above that, ethnographic research practices even find their way into performance art (Tinius 2015).

These different forms of ethnographic research within theater studies require – as the borrowing of the title from Richard David Precht in my title points out – from the researchers involved a virtuoso dance of positioning within an artistic process as well as a dynamic perspectivization: a constant reflexive 'self-alienation' and questioning of one's own role and function, as well as the contextualisation of what is observed and perceived (Hirschauer and Amann 1997).

In my paper I will present and discuss these processes of self-alienation based on exemplary field diary entries. I will conclude with an autoethnographic excursion into my own (collective) artistic conception of a documentary theater production (*Saving the Lemmings* 2015).

**11.00–13.00 TEMPORALITIES: CAPTURING PROCESSES (I)****Writing Desires, and History's Unsolicited Nudes**

Eike Wittrock, University of Music and Performing Arts Graz, AT

A promise of (early) queer studies was to introduce sex and sexuality into academia not only as a topic of research, but also as a critical reflection of the boundaries of methodologies and writing styles, institutions and disciplines, frameworks, and the self-perception of the scholar.

When writing a queer history of theater and performance, I can draw on the work of scholars like Elizabeth Freeman, who sketched out a “bottom” historiography as a „pleasurably porous relation to new configurations of the past and unpredictable futures” (Freeman 2005), where „historicity itself might appear as a structure of tactile feeling, a mode of touch, even a sexual practice.” (Ibid.)

This might be an intriguing metaphor for historiographic practices that work with performance documentation or other kinds of mediated history. But working with personal interviews and acquiring research material through close contact with research subjects, do I really want history to turn into sex? What happens when historiography and ethnography intersect, when the relation to the topic or the researched slides into unexpected areas of intimacy, when the sexualization of theory takes an unexpected turn?

After years of fetishizing transgressions, arts and academia have discovered the (ethical) necessity of consent, which matter both in the relation towards the field of research, as well as in the (academic) field that the research output is addressed to. For the conference I will present an exploration of these questions in essayistic form, based on my encounters with 1970s and 1980s German queer performance history and the desires within, towards and coming from these performances.

**Autoethnographic Process: Reflecting on William Forsythe's *Duo***

Elizabeth Waterhouse, University of Bern, CH

As a former Forsythe dancer, my dissertation research into William Forsythe's *Duo* project took an autoethnographic approach, producing the book *Processing Choreography: Thinking with William Forsythe's Duo* (2022). In this presentation I will describe how I adapted ethnographic research tools to study the recent past of a dance piece—considering archival traces of the dancers' labor (notes, rehearsal videos, photographs, performance videos), live performances, as well as the dancers' memories of interaction onstage, backstage and in rehearsal. My research also demanded critical reflection on my own memories as a former Forsythe dancer. These activities offered a glimpse into the corporeal lineages of practice, the institutionalized ensemble/touring contexts, and the materiality that shaped performance of the piece for two decades (1996–2018). Documenting three years of encounters with *Duo* dancers, I was able to reconstruct a praxeological project history and raise questions relevant for dance historiography. I aspired not only to make backstage processes visible and relevant to aesthetic analysis, but also to substantiate the meaning of this labor for the performers and to myself. In this presentation I will reflect generally on these epistemological strategies and repercussions, foregrounding the challenges to capture and inscribe processes.

**Digital Ethnography in the Field – Documenting and Researching Choreographic Process**

David Rittershaus, University of Applied Sciences Mainz (Motion Bank), DE

In the light of a shift in focus towards the production of performance, dramaturge, and philosopher Bojana Cvejić (2015) has emphasized that “choreographic thought pervades through all modes of performance, be it making, performing, or attending performance.” Cvejić is also one of a handful of dance scholars who have collaborated with choreographers in the past decades to share their methods,

intentions, and practices with a wider audience beyond the stage. In some of these projects new possibilities of digital technology were explored, giving rise to website projects such as William Forsythe's "Synchronous Objects" or the online platform "Oral Site". Besides new publication formats, some of these projects invented digital tools and methods for capturing dance. From within The Forsythe Company a collaborative web application emerged that allows video recordings and other media to be annotated in situ in the rehearsal studio. A shared notebook with videos, photos, and audio recordings (i.e., inscriptions) as well as comments (i.e., descriptions) can be compiled.

My paper will discuss to what extent such a tool can facilitate a Digital Ethnography in the rehearsal room that integrates both the researcher's perspective and that of the artists involved. I will address how digital tools might further help to organize the large number of digital documents produced in artistic processes today and assist in their use for dance studies. This involves the question to what extent more specific digital methods are desirable or even necessary for dealing with the emerging archives and how it can nevertheless be avoided that fieldwork becomes a mere exercise in data collection. I would like to discuss whether a dance scientific approach to (computer assisted) fieldwork should be understood as "ethnographic" in the sense of the empirical social sciences, or whether dance studies should rather strive for new practices of correspondence, entanglements, shared illusions and possibilities of not knowing.

#### **14.30–16.00    TEMPORALITIES: CAPTURING PROCESSES (II)**

##### **Writing About Process**

Katarina Kleinschmidt, Ludwig-Maximilians University Munich, DE

The current boom of ethnographic approaches to dance and theater in their scholarly reflection has long since also been a reflection on the way rehearsal and production processes are narrated. Turning away from chronologically linear and teleological ways of describing a performance as a product, dance and theater scholars have developed topical or systematic approaches (cf. Matzke 2012, Kleinschmidt 2018, Klein 2019, Mikisch 2020, Waterhouse 2022) to investigate artistic work processes in their institutional and material interconnections. This shift in modes of description is also accompanied by shifts in epistemological foundations in dance and theater studies. The paper traces such shifts and asks in particular to what extent relations of "Ereignishaftigkeit" and routine of verbal practices in dance, theater and their academic reflection need to be reconsidered and which notions of (artistic as well as academic) authorship are connected with which forms of description.

##### **Theater in the Making, Subjects in Becoming: Writing on Processes of Production and Arts Education from Within**

Benjamin Hoesch, Justus-Liebig University Giessen, DE

Writing theater in the realm of emerging artists, newcomers and trainees is particularly challenging – as it doesn't meet established working practice or applied experience by (more or less) completed and steadfast artist-subjects. In universities, academies, residencies, or festivals for young artists, we are confronted with both: theater productions as complex and often conflicting pathways to an unpredictable outcome on the one hand, and the formation of artists as evolving, yet still inconsistent and tentative subjects on the other. Both processes are densely entangled: theater productions serve to establish artists as subjects, to try out and train their capabilities, to yield experience and to make them visible on the market; the becoming of subjects gives theater productions a quality of surprise, self-assertion, and transgression.

Current research on directors' academic training requires an epistemological decentering in field research: How can we do justice to the practices of rehearsing a theater production and an artist's subjectivity without functionalizing them from their end – the successful stage performance and the

distinguished artist – as mere stages of progress, learning and personal growth? How do we avoid denigrating practices as ‘dead ends’ or ‘immature try-outs’ while still keeping them open for unpredictable further development?

In the paper, Bruno Latour’s early metaphor of the Janus head in the laboratory will be explored in its potential for describing theater production and subject formation: One face always looks at “Ready Made Science” and thinks processes from the end, where all the answers are known, all problems solved, and all machines ready for use; the other face, however, is directed to “Science in the Making”, where dead ends and breakthroughs are indistinguishable and nothing can ensure a successful outcome. ‘Ready Made’ theater performances and artist subjects are only possible due to the obscure and uncategorizable meanderings of theater in the making and subjects in becoming.

## 16.15–17.45 CONTEXTS: PERFORMANCE ANALYSIS (I)

### **Ethnography and/or Performance Analysis for Researching Rehearsals**

Lisa Großmann, Bern Academy of the Arts, CH

In her often-quoted essay *Towards an Ethnography of Rehearsal* (1998) Gay McAuley pioneered ethnographic approaches for the research of theater processes. Having started to observe rehearsals to deepen the understanding of drama McAuley finally found her interest in “the complex relationships in the rehearsal room and the web of intellectual, imaginative, corporeal, emotional, kinaesthetic, verbal and musical practices.” (McAuley 2006) As theater and cultural studies at the time did not offer an approach for researching rehearsals, McAuley developed her own. She later found an echo for her experiences as researcher in rehearsal and an inspiration in editing “the sheer bulk of material” (McAuley 1998) in ethnographic methodology.

Since McAuley promoted an ethnography of rehearsal, phenomenological approaches, and performance analysis (Aufführungsanalyse) were introduced in (German-speaking) theater studies (for an overview see Weiler/Roselt 2017). In her monograph *Arbeit am Theater* ([*Work at the Theater*] 2012), Annemarie Matzke suggested analyzing rehearsal processes with the help of performance analysis. In his essay *Die Probe als Aufführung* ([*The Rehearsal as Performance*] 2020), Jens Roselt renewed this suggestion and worked out the details of an approach, in which the rehearsal is understood as a performance. Having been following the research on theater rehearsals since 2012, I have observed that Matzke’s and Roselt’s suggestions hardly found an echo in published essays and monographs. Most authors draw on ethnography and praxeology for observation and analysis and thus on methods and theories from sociology and anthropology. Why are ethnographic, sociological, and anthropological accounts more interesting to the researchers of rehearsals than the accounts from their own field of studies? What are the differences and what are the similarities between the different sorts of accounts? By questioning my own attempts of observing, documenting, and analyzing theater rehearsals of the theater/performance groups Showcase Beat Le Mot and Interrobang, I will examine the possibilities, strengths and limits of ethnographic and performance analysis approaches to the study of theater rehearsals.

### **In the eye of the Protest. Perspectives and Challenges of Performance Analysis and/as Ethnographic Research**

Sebastian Sommer, Freie Universität Berlin, DE

As performance analysis is mainly applied in the context of theatrical performances, the underlying ethnographic character of the method can easily be forgotten. Apart from practices of immersive theater, the position of the researcher as participant-observer is called to attention when turning to cultural performances other than performing arts.

Therefore, the paper gives an insight into my research on political demonstrations in the field of nativist-authoritarian populism in Germany. In this context, I have studied the PEGIDA demonstrations in

Dresden as collective protest-performances using performance analysis as an instrument. Leaving the cozy theater space intensifies the character of the research position as directly 'embedded' in the collective action. Accordingly, the ethnographic research environment calls for a rethinking of the methods (and ethics) applied in theater studies. Besides presenting my answers to those challenges, the limitations of the chosen approach need to be addressed as well in order to sketch out perspectives for future research. This includes: (re-)thinking performance analysis as a collective practice (in order to increase the intersubjective verifiability); extending the methods of recording and representing performances beyond (written) protocols; collecting and interpreting manifold (media) traces of (protest) performances (e.g., live-streams); grounding observations in a relational phenomenology.

Those methodological considerations go beyond the narrow field of collective protest. They can be applied to research on performing arts as well. Thus, the field of political and social protest opens opportunities for forging transdisciplinary links between the methods and interests of theater studies and the integration of praxeological approaches in an already ethnographic research context.

### **18.00–19.30 CONTEXTS: PERFORMANCE ANALYSIS (II)**

#### **Staging Differences. Mis-en-scene and Interference of Human Categorisation in Contemporary German-speaking Postdramatic Theater**

Friedemann Kreuder and Stefanie Husel, Johannes Gutenberg University Mainz, DE

Following on from the promises of the theater avant-gardes of the 1930s and 1960s (Warstat), numerous post-dramatic theater forms are emerging that, beyond their demarcation from traditional drama, utilize the field-specific roles of participants (spectator versus actors/characters) as well as the related differentiation of everyday reality and fiction as aesthetic material. More specifically, these contemporary forms of theater play reflexively with the theatrical situation and conduct social experiments by bringing into play and crossing field-specific differentiations of participant roles in their performances (e.g., spectator versus character/actor/role) with ubiquitous human categorizations according to ethnic, religious, national, or other affiliations. As aesthetic experiments, such theater projects aim to explicate aesthetic knowledge – that is, a barely conscious, procedural knowledge about the processes of representation and perception anchored in the bodily practice of participants in a situation.

The paper will therefore show by means of thick descriptions of performance situations that, due to the specific logic of the field, research in theater studies can only be conducted effectively if the performed and/or exhibited practices of human categorization are explored in all their materiality, corporeality, processuality and contingency. We will discuss to what extent and with what effect post-dramatic performances can be placed within the framework of an "ethical regime of the arts" (Rancière). In conclusion, we will argue that the questions raised should be examined within the framework of nuanced, ethnographically inspired future research, in which not only the performances themselves will be studied but where also the placement of programmes, fundraising measures, casting/dramaturgy/production, rehearsals, performances and media as well as audience feedback come into focus respectively.

**Friday, July 7, 2023**

**09.30–10.45 MATERIALITIES: MAKING THINGS WORK (I)**

**“The Art of Crafts: A Praxeography of the Theater Apparatus” – Project Presentation**

Luise Barsch, Ulf Otto and Anna Raisich, Ludwig-Maximilians University Munich, DE

Theater is traditionally understood as an essentially social art, and in recent years it has increasingly come under scrutiny from both micro- and macrosociological perspectives. However, little attention has so far been paid to the socio-technical dimension of theater. For it is precisely the trades and operations, thanks to which aesthetic processes in theater are essentially intertwined with material culture and technical infrastructure, that remain relegated to subordinate tools within the framework of a hylomorphic conception of art that categorically separates art from technology. The project therefore aims at a theoretical rehabilitation of theater as apparatus through an empirical investigation of practices of production, and thus not least of the people, machines, and materials in the trades of theater.

In three closely linked subprojects, the art of theater is observed in everyday operations, in the very places and activities in which it is not usually situated: (a) in the production of objects in the workshops, (b) in the management of resources in the operating offices, (c) in the coordination of processes in the technical rooms. Following the things, bodies, and signs that pass through these places, tracing their paths, as well as the changes and entanglements they undergo along the way, the project enquires into the indissoluble interrelationship of the semiotic, the material, and the social in the articulation of aesthetic propositions. This is accompanied by an epistemic shift in perspective from the auditorium to the backstage of the theater, which methodically approaches procedures of cultural anthropology, but closely links them with a historical and theoretical perspective. The decisive point of reference is therefore not so much ethnography as a praxeography in the sense of Annemarie Mol, whose empirical philosophy is in the tradition of Actor-Network-Theory (Latour) and (feminist) Science and Technology Studies (Haraway). Thus, the project aims not least at a decentering of the concept of performance and the theatrical formulation of a concept of posthuman performativity (Barad), which is interdisciplinary connectable, reacts to recent upheavals and proposes a new materialism of the performative.

**11.15–12.30 MATERIALITIES: MAKING THINGS WORK (II)**

**Stage Lighting and Industrial Boredom**

Martin Young, Anglia Ruskin University, UK

Theater is a place of entertainment. However, there is another affective experience produced in the theater which is unexplored and under-theorized in theater and performance studies: boredom. I examine boredom as a function of theatre's industrial work processes, and consider how their routine organisation, repetition, and automation serve to produce it. I also consider how the aversion to producing boring scholarship has contributed to workplace boredom being overlooked in the wider literature, and explore what methodologies can be used to account for such an unremarkable experience – one which is effectively defined by the absence of anything of note happening. One of the ways that boredom is made visible in both observable workplace behaviour and in archives is through the time-killing activities that workers get up to to alleviate or displace their boring work tasks, and a key example for this paper is the time that lighting operators spend waiting at their consoles between cues, watching tediously familiar action play out in real time.



**Backstage Cartographies: Labor as Community in Midtown Manhattan**

Christin Essin, Vanderbilt University, Nashville, Tennessee, US

Published in 2021, *Working Backstage* (University of Michigan Press) provides a cultural history and ethnography of New York City's theater technicians, giving specific attention to the unionized stagehands who staff commercial Broadway productions. While researching this book, I turned to ethnographic practices to fill significant gaps in a disciplinary archive that has failed, by and large, to preserve the work of backstage laborers and document their industry perspectives. My observations and conversations with Broadway technicians became the primary vehicle through which I documented their work skills and experiences. This process, however, also pulled me into the union culture that structures their work and familial relationships. Local One of the International Alliance of Theatrical Employees (IATSE) has a long history in New York, and its members take pride not only in the quality of their work but also their civic contributions. Local One's technicians are city inhabitants, unlike the tourists who populate most auditoriums, and they know Broadway as an occupational hub that centers their daily endeavors and connect them to the city's political economy. Broadway, as experienced by the unionized worker (and scholar invested in documenting unionized work), is less of an aesthetic experience and more of a social network and civic undertaking.

As part of a conference dedicated to dialogues around the "epistemological repercussions" of ethnographic research strategies, this paper will examine the cultural knowledge gained when a scholar moves backstage into a unionized workspace with genealogical webs of kinship and fierce dedication to progressive labor politics. I will reinvest in the ethnographic research I conducted for *Working Backstage* to reconsider my relationship as a non-union, politically sympathetic scholar to the unionized technician and to reassess our mutual professional influences.

---

The conference is part of the research project [The Art of Crafts. A Praxeography of the Theater Apparatus](#) funded by

