

# Inscribing the Body: An Investigation into the Choreographic Theory and Practice of Mary Wigman

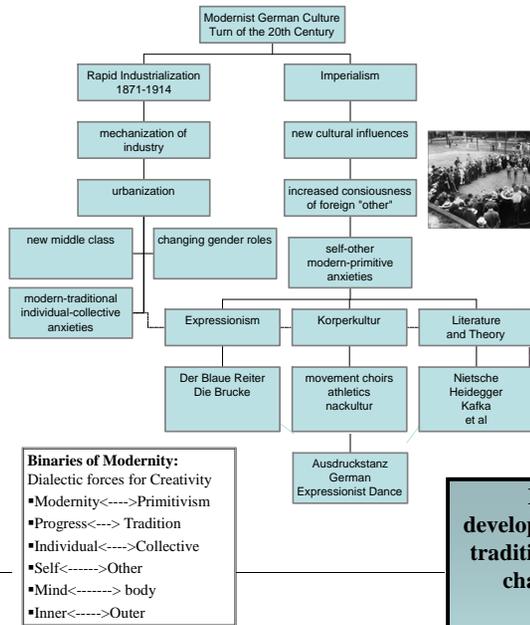
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## III. EVOLUTION OF AN ARTIST: UNDER DALCROZE AND LABAN

## I. ORIGINS

### • MODERNIST CULTURE OF AMBIVALENCE



### German Körperkultur "Body Culture" 1910s-1930s

- Unprecedented proliferation of physical expression
- Aesthetic movement, Athletics, Dance, Nudity
- Figuration of the body in other arts (painting, sculpture, literature)
- Decentralized movement; competing ideologies of the "modern body"
- Practice largely dominated by women:
- Bodies as sites of political change



### Expressionism:

- Exploring the Interior through polarities
- Essential Formal Elements
- Influence of cultural "other"



Mary Wigman, the "mother of German Modern Dance," was an integral figure in the development of Ausdruckstanz, or "Expressionist dance." Her theories challenged patriarchal traditions in the art of dance as it stood in her time, just as her creative vocational endeavors challenged the traditional expectations for a German woman in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century.

#### Theoretical Investigation:

- To explore how Wigman's life and work were shaped by her socio-cultural surroundings and personal experiences
- To analyze her choreographic theories in context of those of her male predecessors, Dalcroze and Laban
- To explore the ramifications of those choices through the lens of gender

#### Practical Exploration:

How can Wigman's theories and dance philosophy inform my individual creative process as a 21st century female choreographer?

## II. WIGMAN'S EARLY LIFE

### • AMBITION VS. EXPECTATION

Born Karoline Sophie Marie Weigmann in Hanover, 1886

### Gymnasium Verboten!

- Despite academic talent and tutors' recommendations, parents prohibited pre-university study at first women's gymnasium
- Feared Mary becoming a "bluestocking," or unattractively literate woman
- Sent to England and Switzerland to study language, music, social dance: suitable subjects for "an attractive and marriageable hausfrau"
- Series of failed engagements, pressure to marry
- Wanted her own vocation



"One is always torn between one's visions, and reality which is mercilessly real"  
-M. W.

### Inspiration, Rejection, Rebellion

#### Wiesenthal Sisters

- Bodily expressivity
- Rejected Wigman as "too old and unballistic to dance"



Jacques Dalcroze  
• Movement choirs



1910: Ran away to study Dalcroze Eurhythmics at Hellerau

### Single at 22

- Traditional age of engagement was 18
- Mounting pressures -> severe emotional breakdown

"I didn't know what I should do. I had to break away... The entire bourgeois life collapsed on top of me"-M.W.

State of agitation facilitated acute awareness of body's viscerally expressive capacity

"In those days one didn't think of a girl having a job. She didn't have a job; she married."  
- M. W.

### Absolute Dance: Movement for Movement's sake

- With or without music
- Non narrative
- Harmony and dissonance as choices for making meaning
- Music created specifically for the choreographic work



"It is the rhythm of the dance that engenders and releases the musical rhythm"- M.W.

### Tanz Gymnastik:

- Training for dancer and everyman
- Physical improvisational impulses
- Space: invisible partner



### Wigman's philosophy

- Upheld dance as art in itself
- Reasserted the individual voice
- Shift of choreographic impetus from external (music, narrative or strictly rational spatial organization) to internal (emotional, irrational physicality)

"The dance is a living language which speaks of man... because its bearer and intermediary is man himself" - M.W.

### Rudolf von Laban: Movement Analysis

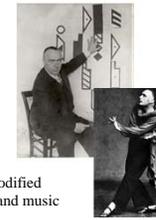
• 1912: Wigman moved to Laban's "Individualist's commune" - Mt. Veritas, Ascona Switzerland

• Improvisational movement  
• Music, word, silence

• Movement analysis  
• Effort, Shape, Space, Time

• Swing Scales

• Labanotation



"There [Hellerau] I found that dancing was my way of expressing myself artistically... [but] I became frustrated by the heavy shackles that bound the body to obey another art"  
M.W.

"My individual way of expression must have been as much torture to Laban as his indefatigable attempts to achieve objectivity were to me" - M.W.

## IV. THE LANGUAGE OF DANCE

### • WIGMAN'S THEORY AND PRACTICE OF CHOREOGRAPHY

#### Three stages of choreographic creation:

- I. Physical, visceral gesture from interior impulse
  - Unconscious force
- II. Supra-personal refinement
  - Conscious craft
- III. Ecstatic synthesis in performance

