

Chapter III *Raumkörper*

...comme un flux, une fumée ou une danse
du temps tracé.¹

Leo Spitzer ends his formidable philological study, “Milieu and Ambiance: An Essay in Historical Semantics,” with an example from dance. He refers to Rudolf Laban who in “his treatise on dancing (*Die Welt des Tänzers*, Stuttgart 1920) speaks, in terms reminiscent of Aristotle, of a *Raumkörper* as a kind of ‘crystallized field.’”² Spitzer is drawn to Laban’s *Raumkörper* because he regards the concept as a concrete example of environing space – thus, precisely the kind of spatiality he had been exploring in his study of milieu and ambiance. Whereas “milieu” suggests an abstract and diffuse realm, “space-body” implies a precisely localizable space, namely, the space immediately surrounding the human body, a literal *Um-Welt*. Laban’s notion of *Raumkörper* bears resemblance to Aristotle’s concept of “place” defined as the area that contains an object and encases it the way a glove envelopes a hand.³ This resemblance, however, is limited because Aristotle’s “place” is defined as a fixed stationary realm that does not travel with the object but “stays behind” when the object moves.⁴ By contrast, Laban’s *Raumkörper* is a fundamentally dynamic space – one that not only accompanies the body everywhere but also moves itself. In view of Laban’s emphasis on movement, Spitzer’s claim that the *Raumkörper* is “a kind of ‘crystallized field’” becomes all the

¹ Didi-Huberman, “La danse du toute chose,” 190.

² Spitzer, “Milieu and Ambiance,” 218

³ Dünne and Günzel, *Raumtheorie*, 21.

⁴ Ibid.

more intriguing: how are we to conceive of a space that is both dynamic and crystallized? How does dance create an animated yet crystalline space?

It is not merely, that Spitzer downplays the fact that the space-body arises in dancing; he also passes over Laban's fascination with the "fluid nature of space."⁵ Spitzer posits the *Raumkörper* as an instance of solidified space.⁶ The *Raumkörper* understood as a solid, crystalline space implies not only a space that is a contour of the body (in the sense of an *Umwelt* determined by the body's *Umriss*) but also a space that is itself contoured and delimited like a figure endowed with plasticity. It is this sense of the *Raumkörper* as a self-enclosed corpus that Spitzer highlights as Laban's contribution to "modern aesthetic thinking."⁷ Laban's concept, he argues, transposes the "solidification of space in modern physics"⁸ into aesthetic categories. This claim is problematic because Laban subsumes, in fact, new scientific theories of space at the beginning of the 20th century to a model of fluid space: "The moment has come," he writes, "that we call into consciousness the fluid nature of space. The first thing we learnt consciously about space was time, its measure in space, the distance, the straight line. But now we have to realize the curvature of space."⁹ Thus, Spitzer's emphasis on the solid, delimited, and static character of the *Raumkörper* belies Laban's own conceptualization of the spatial body as an instance of fluidity. However, one reason for Spitzer's focus on the solidity of Labanian space might stem from the fact that Laban also describes the *Raumkörper* in terms of "crystalline

⁵ Rudolf Laban, *A Vision of Dynamic Space*, compiled by Lisa Ullmann, (London & Philadelphia: Laban Archives in association with The Falmer Press, 1984), 18. This expression is taken from a later text, however, Laban is fascinated with fluid space as early as in *Die Welt des Tänzers*. Spitzer only mentions Laban in a footnote, however, he does so in a text in which footnotes often are longer than the actual body of the main text and in which they more often than not yield as much knowledge as the main body of the essay. It should also be added, however, that Spitzer does not quote Laban directly but – as is common elsewhere in his essay – only a secondary source about Laban.

⁶ Spitzer, "Milieu and Ambiance," 218, footnote no. 6

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Laban, *A Vision of Dynamic Space*, 18

tensions.”¹⁰ “Immer ist es die Form,” Laban argues, “die Raumspannung, die zu uns spricht. Jede Spannung ist ein unsichtbarer Kristall.”¹¹ This chapter will focus on Laban’s first published book, *Die Welt des Tänzers* (1920), to examine how Laban amalgamated scientific discourses, aesthetic theories, and mystical-occult ideas to construct a concept of space that hinges on the antithetical notions of *Spannung* and *Strömung*, where the former stands for crystalline tension and the latter for fluid motion.

Earlier chapters traced the relation between movement and space on the basis of fluids such as air and the vital fluid. These were instances of animated space in which one cannot differentiate between space and the “subtle matter” that fills it.¹² These preceding spatial fluids represented a particular entwinement of space and movement – one in which the medium and the object of movement overlap. This chapter turns to a different kind of entwinement between movement and space, namely, to Laban’s *kinespheres*, which show how “man is able to fill the space around him with his movements and positions.”¹³ This chapter will elucidate not only how space can be filled with movements; it will also point up an overlooked instance of filled space in Laban’s writings on dance – a filled space that invokes precisely notions of a subtle space-pervading fluid such as air or ether. I show that Laban’s spaces are permeated not only with the movements of flowing bodies but also with the currents – “Strömungen” – of subtle fluids. How

¹⁰ In Spitzer’s essay, there is in fact no indication that Spitzer read Laban’s writings. He merely quotes from: Gilbert, Katharine Everett. “Mind and Medium in the Modern Dance.” *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*. Vol. 1, No. 1 (Spring, 1941), pp. 106-129. This might explain his one-sided emphasis on the rigidity of the notion of *Raumkörper*.

¹¹ Rudolf Laban, *Die Welt des Tänzers. Fünf Gedankenreigen* (Stuttgart: Walter Seifert, 1920), 36. (Henceforth cited parenthetically as “WT.”)

¹² Spitzer quotes Fritz Mauthner who wrote that he is “unable to find in what respect the ether might be distinguished from the space it fills.” (Spitzer, „Milieu and Ambiance,” 6.)

¹³ Laban, *A Vision of Dynamic Space*, 11. Elizabeth Selden describes it as a “dance-filled space.” See: Elizabeth S. Selden, *The Dancer’s Quest; Essays on the Aesthetic of the Contemporary Dance*, (Berkeley, Calif., University of California Press, 1935), 62.

do these two instances of fluidity – the corporal body of the dancer and the subtle body of the fluid – relate to one another and interact?

This chapter moves from fluids such as air and ether, in which object and medium of movement overlap, to the fluid spaces of dance in which the distinction between object and medium of movement collapses. Laban's "Raumkörper" refers, on the one hand, to the particular space environing the body of the dancer; on the other hand, however, this space is itself conceived as a body – as a container for movements. Space is not only a means that enables the dancer to execute his movements; it is not only the medium of dance – it is also its object. Laban argues that dancerly movements mold the space around them until space itself becomes integral to the choreic process. As a consequence, movements are not only embodied in the dancer's body but also in the surrounding spatial body. The two are co-constitutive and merge the fluid movement of the dancer with the fluid receptacle of space. Laban's space is a moldable entity that is its own container.

Thus the *Raumkörper* implies an understanding of the spatial body as both "space of the body" and "space as a body." The latter meaning is particularly helpful in shedding light on Laban's entwining of crystallized and fluid space in dance. "Space as a body" implies not only that, in dance, space becomes undistinguishable from the physical body but also that it becomes a "body" in the sense of a volumetric figure – a crystallized form. However, a close reading of Laban's *Die Welt des Tänzers* reveals an additional semantic layer in *Raumkörper*. Laban's spatial body invokes a mingling between space and body that hinges on what Jutta Müller-Tamm describes as the "Leibhaftigkeit der Welt," or "the corporeality of the world"¹⁴ – a notion that posits a fluid transition between the boundaries of an individual's physical body and inner self

¹⁴ Jutta Müller-Tamm, *Abstraktion als Einfühlung : zur Denkfigur der Projektion in Psychophysiologie, Kulturtheorie, Ästhetik und Literatur der frühen Moderne* (Freiburg: Rombach, 2005), 7.

and the world at large. This idea that the self is not to be delimited, that it spills into its surroundings and suffuses space is present in Laban's writing alongside the idea that dancer and space meet in angles, diagonals, and perpendiculars that create clearly delimited figures. We begin to see, thus, how the *Raumkörper* can refer to both crystalline and fluid space: on the one hand, it designates "Raumkristalle" (WT 73), spatial figures drawn by the dancer through her movements around herself; on the other hand, it designates a fluid medium of "Strömungen" in which the dancer's self merges with her surrounding space.

Laban's *Raumkörper* signifies, thus, a medium of dance in a dual sense: it is both a means of dance and, as surrounding space – *Umraum* – a literal milieu thereof. Given the duality in Laban's conception of crystalline form and fluid movement, I contend that Laban's *Raumkörper* represents two different types of environing space. The first kind refers to what Laban describes as *Umraumform*: it is a spatial form, a geometric shape produced by the body's movements. The *Umraumform*, in which one cannot distinguish the contours of the body from those of the surrounding space, reenacts the co-constitution of figure and ground in cubist painting. The second type of *Umwelt* recalls Georges Canguilhem's description of the *milieu* as a domain in which "the individuality of the living does not come to an end at its ectodermal boundaries..."¹⁵ but continues into the space environing it. It is an auratic space because the uncontainable body oozes into its surroundings. In Laban's writing, the tension between the two types of *Umwelt* (the crystalline and the fluid) is never fully resolved – the two seem at times inextricably entwined. Nevertheless, I argue, one can identify in Laban's writings a conception of dance as a vehicle for the transformation of fluid space, of limp *Umwelt*, into a tense spatial figure, a taut *Umraumform*.

¹⁵ Canguilhem, "The Living and Its Milieu," 19

Unlike Wilhelm Worringer who in *Abstraktion und Einfühlung* wants to restrict an object's embeddedness in space by separating object and environment into ornament and plane, Laban wants to turn space itself into an ornament, a crystalline "space-form." However, he wants to accomplish this not by separating space from the dancer (the way Worringer aims to separate space from the object) but rather by redefining the correlation between the two: no longer is the body dissolving passively into the flow of space; instead, through dance, it is purposefully participating in space and experiencing it. In dance, the body is "building spatial entities."¹⁶ Space is created actively by the body in an architectonic sense that recalls August Schmarsow's understanding of architecture as a form of "Raumschöpfung." Significantly, the dancerly creation of space implies that space functions as both a medium of dance (i.e., it is a precondition for the dancer) and an object of dance (i.e., it is the product of the dancer). The space that encompasses the dancer is both a container and an object of the dancer's movements. However, the spatial body is not only object and medium of dance; it is also its concrete milieu – its environing space, which sets it apart from space at large because it bears the mark of the individual dancer. Since the contours drawn by the dancer's movements are the very contours of the resultant space-form, it becomes impossible to tell apart the dancer from the dance-space, the "Tanzkörper" from the "Raumkörper."

The Space of the Moving Body

Laban conceived *Die Welt des Tänzers* (1920) as an exposition of his theoretical views on dance. He terms the examination of the philosophical underpinnings of dance *Choreosophie*,

¹⁶ I borrow this wording from *Empathy, Form, and Space: Problems in German Aesthetics. 1873-1893* Ed. Harry Francis Mallgrave and Eleftherios Ikononou (Santa Monica, CA: Getty Center for the History of Art and the Humanities; distributed by the University of Chicago Press, 1994), 12.

which is complemented in 1926 by *Choreographie*, a book dedicated to the concrete analysis of the practice of dance and movement notation. *Die Welt des Tänzers* is an early attempt to formulate a theory and philosophy of dance at a time when most books on dance were historical overviews that traced dance forms from their early cultic origins to their contemporary cultural manifestations.¹⁷ Laban's book attempts an overarching analysis of dance, one that takes as its starting point what he regards as the fundamentals of dance, namely, movement and space. It is the particular entwinement of these two elements – bodily movement and bodily space – that Laban regards as the elementary constituents of all dance forms.

Space is constituted not only in relation to the body but, more importantly, in relation to the *movement* of the body. In this respect, Laban continues Husserl's emphasis on the corporal and dynamic constitution of space. In "Ding und Raum," (1907) Husserl argues that "all spatiality is constituted through movement, the movement of the object itself and the movement of the 'I.'"¹⁸ Laban's space is no longer the indefinitely extended Newtonian space but rather a phenomenological particularization thereof: it is an "Erlebensraum,"¹⁹ a specific "spatiality" constituted by the dancer. Whereas for Husserl movement involves a combination of the external movement of the object and the internal movement of the ego, for Laban movement refers primarily to the physical motion of the body. However, even as space arises around the body in motion, this motion always signifies a psycho-physiological entwinement of external and internal movement: "ohne Gemütsregung und ohne Denken gibt es auch keine Körperbewegung" (WT 20); furthermore: "einer formalen Komplikation entspricht auch immer

¹⁷ An exception is Frank Thiess, *Der Tanz als Kunstwerk - Studien zu einer Ästhetik der Tanzkunst*, mit 24 Kupferdruckstafeln (München: Delphin-Verlag, 1923.)

¹⁸ Quoted by Mallgrave and Ikonomou, *Empathy, Form, and Space*, 84

¹⁹ Dünne and Günzel, *Raumtheorie*, 105

eine gleichlaufende ... psychologische Komplikation.” (WT 38)²⁰ Since bodily motion is always the expression of inner motion, space is created by a movement in which physis and psychis coincide.²¹ Even if Husserl’s “I” and its “movement” is fundamentally different from Laban’s “inner movement” of emotion and thought, one can nevertheless detect in Laban’s concept of *Raumkörper* a notion of relative space reliant on the moving subject. Since movement is never purely physioloical; since it is inseparable from the movement of interiority – Laban’s space, even if not *constituted* by the movement of an “I,” is nevertheless constituted by elements of subjectivity such as “Denken” and “Fühlen” – thinking and feeling, which express themselves in physical movement.

The Architecture of Dance

Laban’s argument that the dancer creates space around himself²² is in line with August Schmarsow’s architectural theory, which posits architecture as a “creatress of space.”²³ Given that Laban was a trained architect his architectural vision of space does not come as a surprise.²⁴ In his inaugural lecture entitled “Das Wesen der architektonischen Schöpfung” (1893), Schmarsow conceives of architecture as a producer of space: thus, inner architectural space is not a mere contingency of external design; rather, it is built and modeled purposefully. Space is no

²⁰ It is difficult to overlook the influence of Wundt in Laban’s statements. For more on Wundt and Laban, see: Gilbert, “Mind and Medium.” (See note 9.)

²¹ Cf. Isadora Duncan’s lecture delivered in Berlin in 1903 in which she declares that “The dancer of the future will be one whose body and soul have grown so harmoniously together that the natural language of that soul will have become the movement of the body.” Isadora Duncan. *Der Tanz der Zukunft (The Dance of the Future)* Eine Vorlesung. Trans. and introd. Karl Federn (Leipzig: E. Diederichs, 1903) 24-5.

²² Since in *Die Welt des Tänzers* Laban refers to the dancer as male, I will be using the male pronoun. Laban is concerned with showing that dance is actually a masculine activity.

²³ Mallgrave and Ikonomou, *Empathy, Form, and Space*, 57

²⁴ According to Vera Maletic, Laban studied architecture at the École des Beaux Arts in Paris. Vera Maletic, *Body, Space, Expression: The Development of Rudolf Laban’s Movement and Dance Concepts* (Berlin; New York: Mouton de Gruyter, 1987), 5.

longer a mere derivative of a building's external form, the accidental byproduct of its exterior appearance. Instead, Schmarsow underlines the construction of *space as such*. He argues that the starting point for architectural "space creation" is the body's relation to space:

Sobald aus den Residuen sinnlicher Erfahrung, zu denen auch die Muskelgefühle unseres Leibes, die Empfindlichkeit unserer Haut wie der Bau unseres ganzen Körpers ihre Beiträge liefern, das Resultat zusammenschießt, das wir unsere räumliche Anschauungsform nennen, - der Raum, der uns umgiebt, wo wir auch seien, den wir fortan stets um uns aufrichten und notwendig vorstellen, notwendiger als die Form unseres Leibes, - sobald wir uns selbst und uns allein als Centrum dieses Raumes fühlen gelernt, dessen Richtungsachsen sich in uns schneiden, so ist auch der wertvolle Kern gegeben, das Kapital gleichsam des architektonischen Schaffens begründet...²⁵

Even if in his conception of space, Schmarsow combines sensory experience with Kantian forms of intuition, his emphasis nevertheless lies on the empirical – physical – determination of space: it is the muscle sensations, the sensitivity of the skin, and the bodily constitution as a whole that yield the result space. In their editors' introduction to *Empathy, Form, and Space. Problems in German Aesthetics*, Mallgrave and Ikonomou point out that "this emphasis on the whole physis of the perceiver – the awareness of our own body rather than emphasis just on the visual perception itself – was quite new in its approach."²⁶ Laban's notion of space continues this association between physis and space, intensifying Schmarsow's connection between "Leib," "Körper," and "Raum" into a literal *Raumkörper*. The space-body is a matter of limbs in space whose movements create spatial forms; it is as if limbs could literally draw three-dimensional spatial figures.

²⁵ August Schmarsow, "Das Wesen der architektonischen Schöpfung." No page numbers. Accessed through: <http://www.tu-cottbus.de/theoriederarchitektur/Archiv/Autoren/Schmarsow/Schmarsow1894.htm> (May 2011)

²⁶ Mallgrave and Ikonomou, *Empathy, Form, and Space*, 60. Mallgrave and Ikonomou write that Riegl too saw space as the "constitutive principle of architecture," however, Schmarsow criticized that he stressed visual perception too much over "the full bodily and psychic constitution of the human subject" that enables him to "experience space." (64)

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