
The Scientific Dissemination of Dance:
A Performance-lecture by Jone San
Martín and María Auxiliadora Gálvez
(COAM, Madrid, 2019)



Sofía Caballero

The integration of dance studies into the humanities field and its recognition as a subject of study in its own right means that it has also been inserted in institutions and events engaged in the transfer of theoretical and scientific knowledge, for example universities and foundations, congresses, symposiums, etc. But as the German dance scholar Jens Richard Giersdorf acknowledges: “Dance studies permits and requires a different set of theoretical and practical tools for its study than, for instance, a painting or a sculpture.”¹ Unlike in the rest of the humanities, the use of the body when communicating is well appreciated by the audience and allows the participants to develop new tools. These tools were analysed in the performative lecture given by the dancer Jone San Martín and the architect María Auxiliadora Gálvez at the Architecture College in Madrid in 2019.

Introduction

In 2019, the Official College of Architects in Madrid (COAM) hosted a conference called “Dance and Architecture”, in which the architect María Auxiliadora Gálvez and the dancer Jone San Martín were the speakers. The topic was the mutual influence between dance and architecture through the analysis of different works developed by German choreographers in the early 20th century and the personal observations of Jone San Martín as a dance creator in regard to it as part of her own work.

COAM is an institution that does not have a link with dance in any of its forms. It offers conferences and training focused on the requests of its members, who are architects. The building is located in the city centre, a few metres from the Gran Vía.

The audience entered the hall, where the chairs had been arranged in a semi-circle. Between the stage and the chairs, a space had been left where there were already several sheets of paper on the floor. As in a space normally dedicated to conferences, there was a small table with a computer and a couple of office chairs. In the background, on a banner, a projection was displayed.

¹ J. R. Giersdorf, “Dance Studies in the International Academy: Genealogy of a Disciplinary Formation”, *Dance Research Journal* 41(1) (2009): 23.



Photo: COAM.

As Gálvez was speaking, she moved around the space, picking up the papers and changing the patterns of their layout on the floor. At the same time, San Martín moved around the space, stopping only when Gálvez began to speak. Sometimes they approached each other, sometimes they distanced themselves from each other. San Martín used dance at certain points. In other words, the only people who were always still in the same place were the members of the audience. Neither of the speakers sat down to read or to explain their topic. Nor did they sit still on a single point.

The office chairs were not used, and the atrium was a space just like any other corner of the room, especially unnoticed. In other words, the atrium was not used as the *only* space from where to deliver a communication, as in a conventional conference.

As a member of the audience, I can say that I felt part of what was happening. It was like they were building up a fictional and flexible architecture that I could enter and leave at any time. So my understanding of those conceptions and theories increased, although everything was abstract and new for me.

The idea of applying dance concepts when teaching them is not new, since this is how classical ballet lessons work: *I show, you imitate*. But here, there was something

beyond concepts trying to be communicated. We could call it reflections, philosophy, ideas: rational aspects applied within the bodily domain involving the space as well.

This is what makes dance studies or dance research so special – in the sense of different – when comparing it to other academic humanities disciplines.

The conference was an interesting starting point to approach the spaces and formats for the scientific dissemination of dance.

Scientific dissemination as a form of spatialisation

The word “spatialisation” does not exist in the *Cambridge Dictionary*. There is no word that implies some action within the lexical family “space”. Taking the space as a mobile element that is created, provided, accepted, transformed, occupied, taken, is fundamental for its conception as a subject of transitive verbs.

The term *development* seems to be invisible, as if the space was an individual that can control its size and growth, make up its own destiny. But we all know that behind these verbs there is a human intention and willingness. And in naming that willingness, we also appeal to a human behaviour, responding to a purpose, need or circumstances.

Making human conduct invisible when dealing with providing spaces is also problematic since the circumstances around asking for a space and providing it seem to be forgotten. This is also one of the main *raisons d'être* of the institutional critique.

The question to answer at this time is not how to recognise the act of appreciation when one talks about institutionalisation or space development. Instead, it is how dance, far from being an intangible item, since it is people who carry out its development, finds new spaces and formats within the scientific research field.

The space where dance research happens

My principal concern when approaching dance and the space where it happens is the idea that dance can be inserted everywhere, as noted by the French dance researcher Julie Perrin.² Dance does not require any spatial needs, apparently. But I see that banalising the space also means leaving behind the fundamental influence of the physical dimensions around it.

So what does a space require to be called dance-research space?

The conception of space has gradually been endowed with subjectivism. First, let us take a brief look at the genealogy of this term. In the 17th century, Newton differentiated between absolute space and relative space. By absolute space, he meant a simple container that has no connection with what it contains and is therefore not altered by it either. Relative space is a moving dimension determined by the position of bodies. Nevertheless, decades later, Leibniz disagreed with the absolute view of the space-time

² J. Perrin, “L'espace en question”, *Repères, cahier de danse* 2(18) (2006), 3–6.

dimension. Instead, he remarked about orders and systems of relations³ that transform space into an order capable of “making bodies capable of situating themselves, and by which they have a situation with each other when they exist together”.⁴

In the 18th century, Kant introduced experience and willingness, which comes to mean that “firstly, space is a subjective condition and can be perceived as a representation; and, finally, that it can only be experienced if there is a predisposition to do so”.⁵

According to the theatre space scholar Lisa Bowler,⁶ the most extended definition of space is the one that the French sociologist Henri Lefebvre introduced in *The Production of Space*.⁷ Nevertheless, Lefebvre considers space as the result of interactions and not as an isolated product in itself, developing the idea that it is defined by the way it is used.⁸ Those uses configure what he calls “spatial practice”, so we can say that, consequently, spatial practice produces space(s). Bowler gives an example: “sleeping in a room is a spatial practice that produces the space of a bedroom.”⁹

A significant consequence of the based-on-use definition is that, for example, the use of a theatre is not taken for granted just because it has been built as such, following the architectural standards of similar structures. Even if it was built to be a theatre, if it is not used as a theatre it will never be named “theatre”.

Alongside theory and critique, one can also highlight this subjectivism of the concept of space in *language*. This is the case with the term “place”, which, in some contexts, appears almost as a synonym for *space*. The reason for resorting to this word is to bring in the definition proposed by French thinker Marc Augé:

If a place can be defined as relational, historical and concerned with identity, then a space which cannot be defined as relational, or historical or concerned with identity will be a non-place.¹⁰

This definition appears in Augé’s *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity* (1992), in which he also insists on the role of language and communication in the constitution of space and place: “[C]ertain places exist only through the words that evoke them.”¹¹

³ M. Futch, *Leibniz’s Metaphysics of Time and Space*. Boston Studies in the Philosophy and History of Science, vol. 258 (Tulsa: Springer, 2008).

⁴ Leibniz, 1716, as cited in S. Low, *Spatializing Culture: The Ethnography of Space and Place* (New York: Routledge, 2017).

⁵ Low, *Spatializing Culture*, 16.

⁶ L. Bowler, “Theatre Architecture as Embodied Space: A Phenomenology of Theatre Buildings in Performance” (doctoral dissertation, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, 2015).

⁷ H. Lefebvre, *La production de l’espace* (Paris: Anthropos, 1974).

⁸ Martínez, 1974; Low, *Spatializing Culture*.

⁹ Bowler, “Theatre Architecture as Embodied Space”, 35.

¹⁰ M. Augé, *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity* (London: Verso, 2008), 63.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, 77.

Indeed, language gives meaning to a place or space according to the relation to what is or happens in it.¹²

Coming back to the spatial-practice concept and the social use of the definitions of space, it can be said that it is that use of the space that provides not only the definition but also the identity that Augé talks about.

Back to the conference hall: it was really far from a specific dance-studies conference place. One might think that this space was never used, or not used so often, for such a purpose. According to the French philosophers Deleuze and Guattari, everything shall be converted into a machine that produces something, as they reflect in *Anti-Oedipus*.¹³ Applying that idea to this context, that never-ever-before thought as a space for a dance conference turned into a machine that produced a dance research gathering.

Format: The intrinsic duality between practice and theory

To address the format of dance-studies dissemination, it is necessary to highlight a fundamental characteristic of this discipline: the duality between practice and theory. But, before discussing the possibility of its communication, it is interesting to ask ourselves what dance research is.

The German dance scholar Jens Richard Giersdorf tries to provide a simple definition: “It is like art history, just writing about dance instead of paintings.”¹⁴ This answer, which might be pleasant for a general audience, does not fit with the nature of dance studies, because “Dance studies permits and requires a different set of theoretical and practical tools for its study than, for instance, a painting a sculpture, or a performance art piece.”¹⁵

I would like to comment on the need to explain what dance studies are. It is true that the central theme of this paper is not to condemn the general lack of knowledge about what a dance researcher actually does. However, the reason for addressing the space and format of how research results are reported lies in providing examples, theories, reasonings, fundamentals, beyond the walls of any conservatoire or dance faculty.

Giersdorf also points out that the historically strong prejudice between manual and intellectual labour may be the reason for the relative youth of dance as an independent academic field, the “everlasting discourse on the relationship between theory and practice, which often stands in for the dichotomy of performance/production versus intellectual inquiry”.¹⁶

¹² H. Fang, “Prehistoric Cosmopolis: Pictographic Writing as a New Spatial Prototype”, in *What is Critical Spatial Practice?*, edited by N Hirsch and M Miessen, 61–62 (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012).

¹³ G. Deleuze and F. Guattari, *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia* (London: Viking Penguin, 1977).

¹⁴ Giersdorf, “Dance Studies in the International Academy”, 23.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ *Ibid.*

When translating that polarity into educational models, then the verb “split” is invoked to mark the division between the pedagogy of dance practice and dance research as humanities subjects. In terms of space, a conservatory would be the place for practice and the university the place for theoretical knowledge. This pattern, according to Giersdorf, started in Germany, England and the US in the 1980s and 1990s, and has expanded geographically.

Duality applied within the language domain

Language does not provide a clear and evident difference between what it is to practise dance and what it is to think and write about it, as happens in other humanities disciplines. The integration of dance studies into the humanities field and its recognition as a subject of study in its own right means that it has also been inserted into those places where the transfer of theoretical knowledge has traditionally taken place, for example the multi-purpose hall of the College of Architects.

Returning to the conference in Madrid, I noticed that it was not a normative conference but a conference-lecture full of action. Rather, at the same time as communicating, movements were traced, there were pauses that coincided with glances between the speakers. We could say that the terms “experience” and “theatricality” reached their maximum extent.

It should not be forgotten that lectures tend to be framed in an academic environment, and therefore in a school model, where the place of the teacher is clearly differentiated from that of the students. And the layout of a classroom or conference centre already shows, before anyone begins to speak, the relationship that will exist between those who attend. One could say that it is similar to those theatres that pit the performers and the audience against each other.

We can understand that the origin of performative conferences lies in the desire to modify the traditional form of oral communication of knowledge and bring it to the stage, in the sense of including not only the voice but also the body. As the performer Miguel Oliveira points out:

Taking the concept of “school” and updating it as a model of thinking, the understanding of education and the element of learning as a space of experiences and the implementation of education as a strategy for emancipation, performative conferences are a research model for the realisation of unusual projects that encourage the dissemination of information of a certain nature, a platform for meeting, gathering and experiential learning that seeks new formats.¹⁷

¹⁷ M. Oliveira, “Introducción”, in *Conferencia performativa. Nuevos formatos, lugares, prácticas y comportamientos artísticos*, by M Oliveira, 3–7 (Salamanca: MUSAC/This Side Up, 2014), 15.

The development of the performance-lecture since the 1950s is very much related to body expression, and it seems to delete the *split* mentioned above and, therefore, the preconceived assignment of space.

The inclusion of practice in the communication of theory is not limited to the realm of conferences. We can find it in dance congresses as well. The organisers of Tanzkongress 2006 in Germany explain that this duality lies in a “special format that has thus developed its mixture of expert meeting, reflection platform, presentation forum and festival”.¹⁸ As part of the recap of what happened in that edition, the German dance historian and dance dramaturge Patricia Stöckemann acknowledges the importance of different formats, such as lectures, discussions, working groups, laboratories and lecture-performances. She recaps it this way:

The participants addressed future-oriented structural issues and cultural-political strategies, as well as artistic processes, aesthetic issues and new perspectives for dance training practices. In addition to lectures and demonstrations, the participants were able to delve more deeply into problematic issues and develop new theories in work groups and workshops. The congress was accompanied by dance events and performances, organized in cooperation with several Berlin theatres.¹⁹

The most recent edition of the congress took place in Mainz. The diversity of spaces and formats can be seen in the photographs shown here.

When analysing other dance congresses, the result is that there is no uniform format and the themes can be very broad (55th World Congress on Dance Research, UNESCO, 2020) or very specific (“A Century of Dance in Spain (1836–1936): Identities, Repertoires, Imaginaries and Contexts”, CSIC, 2021).

Again, the peculiarity of dance science resides in its duality: if one compares a dance congress with a contemporary art congress, for instance, nobody expects an artist there to paint but rather for scholars, writers and art critics to analyse trends, materials, contexts or biographies around a theme.

¹⁸ S. Gehm, K. von Wilcke and H. Hartung, “Questions of Participation: Implementing the German Dance Congress as an Artistic, Reflective, and Political Project”, in *Moving (Across) Borders: Performing Translation, Intervention, Participation*, edited by G. Brandstetter and H. Hartung, 219–229 (Bielefeld: Transcript, 2017), 220.

¹⁹ P. Stöckemann, “Tanzkongress Deutschland”, *Magazin der Kulturstiftung* 10 (2006): 10.



Tanzkongress 2022 in Mainz. Photo: Andreas Etter.



Tanzkongress 2022 in Mainz. Photo: Andreas Etter.

Conclusion

Far from being an isolated or even out-of-context event, Gálvez and San Martín's performative lecture was the continuation of a line of thought, already established in the latter part of the 20th century, especially by French thinkers such as Lefebvre and Augé. To study the notions of space and see the evolution towards aspects such as subjectivism, perception, use, practice and, finally, identity is relevant for dance. The reason is that, both in its performative form and as a subject of research, dance seems to be able to insert itself into any space. In fact, it is the action of talking about dance, presenting research and results offering discussions that makes the space into one dedicated to its scientific dissemination.

Indeed, the duality of dance studies makes it possible both to break the traditional rules of academia and to make of itself something performative.

Dance has only recently been consolidated as a subject of study, as a science in its own right. One might think that prejudice towards physical and body work versus the intellectuality assigned to theory, to stillness, may be the reason why this science, which is very much linked to the development of society and to the individual – in one's intimacy and in how one presents oneself to the world – has taken so long to be studied.

In parallel, spaces have been generated for it as such. This does not necessarily mean that new spaces have been built exclusively for this purpose. Very often, as in

this case, conferences, congresses and symposiums can be integrated into spaces that were previously designed or intended for other disciplines or other *spatial practices*.

That is, the space *for* scientific communication of dance can be *anywhere*, apparently. However, it cannot be ignored that it will be modified due to the interaction with it. The trigger that may originate the alteration may be the duality that is characteristic of this discipline. It will alter its normal use, and the spatial practice will then be different.

References

- Augé, M. *Non-Places: An Introduction to Supermodernity*. London: Verso, 2008.
- Bowler, L. "Theatre Architecture as Embodied Space: A Phenomenology of Theatre Buildings in Performance". Doctoral dissertation, Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München, 2015.
- Deleuze, G. and F. Guattari. *Anti-Oedipus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. London: Viking Penguin, 1977.
- Fang, H. "Prehistoric Cosmopolis: Pictographic Writing as a New Spatial Prototype". In *What is Critical Spatial Practice?*, edited by N Hirsch and M Miessen, 61–62. Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2012.
- Futch, M. *Leibniz's Metaphysics of Time and Space*. Boston Studies in the Philosophy and History of Science, vol. 258. Tulsa: Springer, 2008.
- Gehm, S., K. von Wilcke and H. Hartung. "Questions of Participation: Implementing the German Dance Congress as an Artistic, Reflective, and Political Project". In *Moving (Across) Borders: Performing Translation, Intervention, Participation*, edited by G. Brandstetter and H. Hartung, 219–229. Bielefeld: Transcript, 2017.
- Giersdorf, J.R. "Dance Studies in the International Academy: Genealogy of a Disciplinary Formation". *Dance Research Journal* 41(1) (2009): 23–44.
- Lefebvre, Henri. *La production de l'espace*. Paris: Anthropos, 1974.
- Low, S. *Spatializing Culture: The Ethnography of Space and Place*. New York: Routledge, 2017.
- Oliveira, M. "Introducción". In *Conferencia performativa. Nuevos formatos, lugares, prácticas y comportamientos artísticos*, by M Oliveira, 3–7. Salamanca: MUSAC/This Side Up, 2014.
- Perrin, J. "L'espace en question". *Repères, cahier de danse* 2(18) (2006), 3–6.
- Stöckemann, P. "Tanzkongress Deutschland". *Magazin der Kulturstiftung* 10 (2006).