

Creative Works

On Dance and Aging: An Interview with Berlin-Based Researcher-Dancer Susanne Martin

(with RDS Multimedia and Creative Works Editor, Raphael Raphael)

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Abstract: In this interview with Susanne Martin, she considers ways in which she combines her artistic practice as dancer with her theoretical research to better understand aging and dance.

Editors' note: This interview was created in February and March of 2018 via email. I was first exposed to the work of Susanne Martin in an artist panel organized by Jean Marie Casbarian last summer (2017) during a residency I attended with Transart Institute at Uferstudios in Berlin. I was inspired by Susanne's unique approach to her research on aging and dance. She leverages both the living experience of performing in a body and more traditional forms of research. Her unique path as researcher/artist surely invites us all to think about different ways in which we might tap our whole experiences in our work and research. Where relevant, her responses here occasionally include links to experience some of her research/performance firsthand. –RR

RR: How can dance contribute to our knowledge about the experience of aging?

SM: Contemporary dance has the potential to question or dismantle stereotypical body and age-related values and images that are not only a part of dance but also our everyday culture (Albright 1997, Lipscomb and Marshall 2010, Ross, 2007).

I have been interested in images and narratives of age(ing) as a choreographer since 2003. I was thirty-five then. Since then I have created and performed several characters, male and female, dance amateurs and dance professionals between fifty and seventy-five years of age, as well as less character-based deconstructions of age(ing). One could say that this was a quite young age for making age(ing) the major topic and inspiration for one's artistic work. I argue, however, that a premature age(ing) consciousness and concern is rather symptomatic for the dance world's relationship to age(ing). Imagined as well as actually experienced age limits and exclusions start already in childhood, especially in places where the competition and selection-oriented tradition of ballet, with its strict physical norms, has a strong influence on the educational and professional structures of dance (Schwaiger, 2012; Wainwright and Turner, 2006).

Dance as an art form, as a profession, as a field of knowledge and a field with very particular and specialized bodily practices, has a peculiar relationship to age(ing). Western theatre dance has often focused on youthful physicality and, as such, takes part in an unquestioned marginalization of older bodies. However, dance, and specifically contemporary dance, is also

a site for questioning and inventing new ways of experiencing and presenting human bodies in movement (Benjamin, 2010; Brayshaw and Witts, 2014; Hoghe, 2005). Therefore, contemporary dance also has the potential to question or dismantle stereotypical body and age-related values and images that are not only a part of dance but also our everyday culture (Ann Cooper Albright 1997, Valerie Lipscomb and Leni Marshall 2010, Janice Ross 2007). The ways in which this potential can be realized, and indeed, is already being realized is the subject of my PhD thesis *Dancing Age(ing)* that I published in 2017.

Dance is known to be a field with very short career trajectories. Research on the work realities of professional dancers shows that “although [dancers] thought they could continue until their late thirties, on average they actually stopped dancing professionally in their early to mid-thirties” (Baumol, Jeffri and Throsby 2004, p. 4). *Dancing Age(ing)*, however, reveals that the idea of a natural decline of ability does not hold as reason for the traditionally short career of performing dancers in Western artistic dance. I argue that the dominant understanding of age(ing) in the dance profession naturalizes a supposed youthfulness and reiterates an oversimplified “progress-peak-decline” narrative that glosses over underlying issues of debilitating power structures and the problems of a generally underfinanced professional field. Therefore, in the sense of being confronted with ageist norms and often being involved in “process[es] of implicit aging self-stereotypes” (Levy and Banaji, 2002, p. 62) since childhood, I argue dance artists to be experts of social or cultural age(ing) (Woodward, 2006) already by early midlife.

To bring it back to my personal development: age and questions of being either too young or (more often) of being too old have been an issue in my dance life probably since my first dance classes at the age of six. At the age of thirty-five, when many dancers leave the professional field, I started to engage with age(ing) questions artistically. Then, at the age of forty-two I embarked on the adventurous trip of doing a PhD research in dance on “Rethinking Age(ing) in and through Improvisation Practice and Performance,” so the subtitle of my thesis. [It’s important] that I did not enter a PhD program as a way out of the dance profession. I wanted to continue being a performer. I decided for academic research because I realized that it is possible by now to conduct PhD research as a practicing artist and with a focus on the artistic methods and practices I developed as dance artist. What is called a practice as research methodology in the UK (Nelson, 2013) and artistic research in continental Europe (CARPA 1 2009) allowed me to clarify and deepen my ongoing enquiry into questions of age(ing) while also continuing to clarify and deepen my artistic practice of improvisation and performance making. On the one hand, I researched the working strategies of improvisation experts (including myself) that support them to make dance improvisation their life-long artistic practice. On the other hand, I identified specific performance strategies in current dance making that offer an audience images and narratives of age(ing), which divert from stereotypical youth/age dichotomies. I identified performance works that do not repeat the hierarchical contrasting of strength versus weakness, fresh potential versus tiring stagnation, talented or rampant youth versus either demented or wise old aged. Furthermore, through the two solo performances I created as artistic outcomes of my research (*The Fountain of Youth* and *The Fountain of Age*), I developed myself some specific deconstructive

strategies to stage age(ing) in ways that critically question and complicate dominant concepts and representations of age(ing). (See excerpts of the performances here:

<https://vimeo.com/130871033>; <https://vimeo.com/142264906>)

RR: What can dancing do that writing cannot?

SM: Dance as a stage art form can show us bodies, movements, and physical relationships that remind us of the actual uniqueness, quirkiness, and tenderness of having and being a body. Dance reminds us of how precarious and in process of constant change we are as we go through life, through a day, or from one movement to another. Writing can do that as well, I am doing it right now. However, doing or watching dance activates other receptive channels and allows for other kinds of experiential moments. I have always loved the doing of dance; my pleasure in watching dance is still growing, as well as my satisfaction in reading and writing about it.

RR: What is the role of improvisation in your practice and how does it connect to your understanding of aging?

SM: I define my own dancing and performance-making as improvisation-based, because for me improvisation has always been a major reference point, a training focus, and an intellectual stimulation. It is also at the heart of my teaching. At the beginning of my research on age(ing) there was the obvious observation that many of the renowned improvisation focused dance artists keep developing their practice far beyond their forties and even fifties and sixties (see for example Anna Halprin performing on her ninety-fifth birthday: <https://www.annahalprin.org/recentnews>). The apparent age-friendliness of improvisation led me to dig deeper and ask what it is that makes this practice age-friendly? From interviews and participant observations with improvisers aged between forty-six and sixty-three I filtered a range of shared strategies through which they support their life-long dance practice. On a theoretical level this led me to try to articulate the nomadic subjectivities (Braidotti, 1994) that come to the fore when movement artists continue to engage with the claim of improvisation, namely to work creatively with what is present here and now throughout the changes of the body and the changes of life. In *Dancing Age(ing)* I, therefore, argue that the practice of improvisation offers an implicitly critical position to the traditional youth-orientation of Western dance and to the ageist undercurrents that impact contemporary culture in general.

RR: How would you describe your current practice?

SM: I am a dancer who choreographs, I am a choreographer who improvises, I am an improviser who researches, I am a researcher who enquires age(ing) from the perspective and with the methods I developed as a dancer. During the PhD research I focused my artistic practice quite strictly on soloing. Since I completed my PhD and the book, I could finally open myself again to a range of artistic collaborations. I am involved in a variety of performance projects with improvisers from the fields of dance and music. I co-choreographed a piece for eight young semi-professional performers (*Von der Schönheit und Seltsamkeit des Anlehns*) with my colleague Eliane Hutmacher. After years of being

exclusively interested in people of at least my age and older this was an exciting excursion into foreign territory. Besides all this, I am working on the format of danced lectures, which means to present my research on age(ing) through a mix of speaking and dancing. In other words, at each academic conference I spend at least half of my presentation time dancing. I use my live, always age(ing), always precarious body to create an experiential moment for my audience. I have danced already in university corridors and around enormous desks in tiny lecture rooms. How to make such a danced lecture an intellectually satisfying and experientially relevant moment for my academic colleagues is probably the most exciting challenge I gave myself lately. (See a recording of a danced lecture: <https://vimeo.com/album/3608339/video/242220635>)

RR: Are there particular works by others that inspire your practice?

SM: I am still inspired by the improvisers who informed *Dancing Age(ing)*, Ray Chung, Rosalind Crisp, Katarina Eriksson, Julyen Hamilton, Andrew Morrish, and Kirstie Simson. They are my colleagues, friends, and teachers. They keep finding unique ways to continue their particular artistic practices, to stay inspired, to trust change, and to play with what is available to them at each moment.

RR: What are you most excited about now in your practice?

SM: There is a strong sense of new beginnings, which I enjoy. I will teach a contact improvisation workshop in Ukraine soon. I am excited about teaching at the moment and I have never been to the Ukraine, so that is wonderful. And I am just about to start a post-doctoral research on improvisation and embodied knowledge. This will be my next very exciting journey into and through a continuously changing here and now.

Susanne Martin, PhD is a Berlin-based artist and researcher in the field of contemporary dance and performance. She works internationally as soloist and in collaborative settings. Her artistic practice and research focuses on improvisation, contact improvisation, narrations of the aging body, humor and irony in dance, artistic research methods, and improvisation-based approaches to learning, knowledge production and knowledge dissemination. Her book *Dancing Age(ing): Rethinking Age(ing) in and through Improvisation Practice and Performance* has been published by transcript in 2017. www.susannemartin.de

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