

OF TOUCHING AND BEING TOUCHED

***Memories, thoughts, and reflections on performance
from Hellmut Gottschild***



Hellmut Gottschild presents his lecture-performance at Temple Dance Department's 50th Anniversary, Conwell Dance Theatre (April 26, 2025); photo by Shannon Bramham

Note: This reading of an earlier lecture-performance, presented as part of Temple University Dance's 50th anniversary in 2025, was preceded by a filmed excerpt of dance artist Hellmut Gottschild's solo performance of Weavings, choreographed to the music of Paul Epstein and performed at Judson Church, NYC, in 1996.

INTRODUCTION:

Gotschild Speaking:

What you just saw. . .that was nearly thirty some years ago. I was already in my sixties then. And of course, I'm not the same person anymore. But I'm also still the same person and I hope that what I'm going to say now makes some sense given what you just saw. So here I am. . .

OF TOUCHING AND BEING TOUCHED: Memories, thoughts, and reflections on performance:

This is a reading of a lecture-demonstration on how the work of Mary Wigman, who was my 'master' if you want, Jean-Louis Barrault, and personal experience contributed to my own view of dance as a tactile phenomenon. . .

After coming to America, some fifty years ago, for the first ten years, I lived in many different abodes, sometimes in communal houses, at others in apartments with one partner or by myself. But then friends and colleagues suggested that it was advantageous to stop renting and buy my own home. My own house? Wouldn't that mean I am settling down? Forever? After all, I had come from Germany where—at least back then, when I lived there—after having bought a house, one would stay there and grow old in it. What if I want to change, to move? Then you sell it and buy another. Well, when in Rome you do as the Romans. And I bought.

And one sunny summer afternoon I stood on my back porch, overlooked my property and said to myself: all mine. Mine? Is this tree now my tree? These blades of grass? Mine? Can any living thing be mine? What does the tree care that—after years with Mr. McHugh—it now has the owner Gottschild? And is this hand that shades my eye that is connected to this wrist which is connected to this elbow that is connected to this shoulder which is connected to. . .and so on. Is this hand mine, is this elbow, this shoulder? Are they mine or are they *me*? If they are mine, that is, my property, who then is this 'I' that possesses them? Where is it located? As I claim ownership of more and more of my body, this mysterious 'I' has to retreat deeper and deeper. . . Where? Into the brain? But—since it is also *my* brain—it will have to be evicted from it as well, and eventually vanish. . .leaving this—an absentee landlord.

Gottschild Recorded Voice:

Instead of establishing ownerships and boundaries, I'd like to speak about the brain, the shoulder, the arm, the hand, the tree, the air out there, as being neither my, nor anyone else's, property but conduits, available to receive and be filled with. . .me, with my life, that is, life that needs to breathe and pulsate, to expand and recede and for which my body mustn't be a prison, nor my skin a barrier.

They are passages for energy that flows outward and ebbs back, and through which I am being touched by external energies. The outerworld and the innerworld in flux, perpetually expanding and receding, converging, transcending each other, sometime conflicting: that is also what I see as being at the heart of the dancing and teaching of Mary Wigman when she spoke of 'imaginary space,' the space as partner, and that is what I carried away with me and that's how I'd like to experience dance—not only as a dancer but also as an audience member—as touch rather than solely design, as much tactile as it is visual.



Mary Wigman, identified as a solo dance from both *Der Weg* (1932) or *Dance in the Stillness* from *Autumnal Dances* (1937); photo by Albert Renger-Patzsch

Gottschild Speaking:

Of course, Wigman was neither the first nor the only one who was aware of such

concepts—or rather experiences—nor can those be limited to dance. They appear in different form in various areas of performance. Performance: I am very fond of this English word 'performance' for it is not limited to the performing arts but applies as well to situations of daily life. Etymologically rooted in the Old French 'fornir,' to furnish, it simply describes the fulfilling of a task or function. Accordingly, a performer is one who renders a service or brings a task to conclusion, no different and certainly no better than surgeons, carpenters, or ball players who all perform with talent and know-how and who all deserve our applause.

Yes, we all perform. Performing, as I see it, begins early in life. You see, when we leave the womb each one of us is an entire world, complete and closed, with faces directed inward, clenched fists, turned in legs: like little angry old men. Not until some time later does it dawn on us: I am not the only one. There are others. They spy on me. They control my food supply. And step by step, we learn to open up, to receive, to give: to interact. Our utterances that had previously been flung blindly into the world become conscious communication. This I see as a kind of second birth, and this is also the beginning of our performance career. Performance—as giving and receiving.

Gottschild Recorded Voice:

I was born in 1936. The place was Berlin where precisely at the moment I received the first slap on my rear end, Mary Wigman, then almost fifty, rehearsed a group dance on the lawn that was intended to soon—in fact, just two days later—see the 11th Olympic Games. Little did neither Mary Wigman nor I know that 27 years later, in a much changed Germany, I would be her teaching assistant, the last and youngest before she decided to discontinue her studio in 1967. After that I moved to the United States.

Gottschild Speaking:

Incidentally, her first assistant, Hanya Holm had left Mary almost forty years earlier to open a Wigman Studio in New York.

Gottschild Recorded Voice:

So when I arrived here, the German Dance bug was already here, had spread and Americanized itself, that is, the dance had absorbed new influences but also given up certain elements, elements that, as I see it, would be viable and perhaps necessary even today. There is first and foremost that partnership with the space I touched on earlier and about which I shall say more. There is also the experience of the lived movement, 'lived' as opposed to 'mastered.'

Gottschild Speaking:

One section of a piece that we—that is, *ZeroMoving* [a dance company Gottschild founded in 1972]—made in the seventies was based on a sentence by Gertrude Stein, scored by composer Paul Epstein and spoken and repeated by the dancers in slow motion as they were moving, emphasizing both meaning and musical quality of the spoken words. . . Paul Epstein, my friend and collaborator. He passed away recently and I miss him. . . Stein, a poet and Mary Wigman's contemporary, wrote: "If the movement that is any movement is lively enough perhaps it is possible to know that it is moving even if it is not moving against anything." Did you get it? Stein, as you may know, often writes without punctuation, leaving it to the reader to clarify the meaning. Paul's way was to speak the whole phrase slowly as one word. . .

"If the movement that is any movement is lively enough perhaps it is possible to know that it is moving even if it is not moving against anything."

So, according to her, when movement is lively enough it can reveal itself as being in motion. We need no contrast or context as, for example, something that is at rest. She says 'lively', not 'skilled' or 'mastered' or 'virtuoso.' No, we live, are in touch with, not merely execute the movement. Execute - what a word. In it, perfection and death are wedded. Oh yes, perfection and death can be very close to each other, can't they?

Gottschild Recorded Voice:

Does this mean that there should be no technique? Not at all. It simply is to say that the dancer is a living, feeling being who is served but not defined by skill. We must not allow the body to be colonized by a technique, for each technique embodies beyond certain skills also style, that is, a point of view, exclusive and, in itself, inert. The 'lived

movement' is a journey through states of being and feeling, not to "express" them but to listen to and follow their rise and fall, experience them and bring them to resonate. Technique must be adjustable, and again and again, adjusted means that serves, serves in clearing the way from impulse to form, in making the latter repeatable and, like a mantra, to retrace the connection from the form back to its origins. By thus filling the movement with life and inhabiting it, dancers could, in the truest sense of the phrase, find themselves: in their moving.



Gottschild's performance-lecture at the Akademie der Künste, Berlin (November 11th, 2006)

Gottschild Speaking:

I would like to complement the notion of dance as a solely visual experience with that of it being tactile. As I look at you, I cannot help seeing each of you in context—of the person next to you, the group around you, the entire audience, the background, the room, etc. . . The further I move back, the larger my field of vision becomes. I may try to block out the peripheral vision but even the frame of my hand becomes a reference. I cannot help seeing you in relation to something,

or someone, in comparison. Sometimes we call that 'objective.' We know that, in order to be objective, we mustn't be too close to our object, must distance ourselves from it. This critical distance, I believe, is an important and necessary position. But something is lost: it doesn't allow us to fully experience—unless its complement is equally present, touch. Is it possible to touch critically? No. In touching, the surroundings, the context, the critical position, disappear—it's just you and me. And: when I touch an object—or a person—I cannot help being touched, that is, being affected. I have changed from observer to participant. Here the other has become a little less "Other." And this is how I want to experience dancing—as tactile at least as much as visual. But a dancer cannot touch that person in the back row, can he? Well, let's listen to what Jean-Louis Barrault has to say. Are you familiar with that name? You may have seen *Les Enfants Du Paradis* (*Children of Paradise*). Barrault made that movie and acted in it. At any rate, he was a great and influential French actor, theater director, and mime. In his essay "The Tragic Mime" he writes:

Gottschild Recorded Voice, Reading Barrault:

"But there exists a truly "royal," "enchanted" and "magical" sense, which is poorly known and may perhaps embrace all the others: the sense of touch. This is the sense which surpasses us physically, I mean to say. Just as the earth is surrounded with an atmospheric layer, man, because of his living irradiation, envelops himself in a magnetic halo. This magnetic halo which belongs to every man, touches the outer objects even before the skin comes into contact with these objects. According to individual vitality or education, this magnetic halo can vary in thickness. It can extend several miles outward. This is why some sorcerers come to meet you, even though they have not been warned of your arrival. Their magnetic halo has been touched."ⁱ



Jean-Louis Barrault, *The impromptu of Sunday* (October 29, 1955); photo by Daniel Fallot

Gottschild Speaking:

That sounds mystifying, I know. But Barrault, I assure you, is no dreamer—or, maybe, he was a dreamer but certainly not a screwball. At any rate, he is a man of the theater. All performers know this extending oneself beyond one's physical boundaries as 'stage presence.' In German we call it 'Ausstrahlung'. . .radiance. . . that is, energy in motion that can reach and 'touch' us, quite physically. And haven't we all experienced that a person's presence appears to dominate an entire room without him/her behaving in an exaggerated manner? Or realized that we have shared a space with someone whose presence had escaped us till then, without—when we investigate more closely—his demeanor being in any way understated?

And I repeat, touching is never a one-way street. It is always exchange and all human exchange, be it between persons or between a person and his/her

environment, is based on one single principle that is embodied in our breathing: giving and receiving. We receive air and we give it back [*he demonstrates*]. In—Out, In—Out. . . I receive—I give; the ancient complements of ebb and flow, male and female, yin and yang. . . Actually, there is a third one that can modify giving and receiving: neutral. I Stop, Hold, Lock. [*He demonstrates: thrusts hand forward palm upraised; grasps wrist; clenches fist.*] What if I give to you and lock? I refuse. Or I receive from you and hold? I keep. If giving and receiving are principles of life, this one indicates the cessation of life.

So, we already have four basic situations: giving and receiving, keeping, refusing. But to grasp the subtleties and complexities of human action we have to add another variable: the opposites of active and passive, that is according to my will or being moved by other forces, external or internal. When I receive actively, I take. When I give passively, I lose (perhaps my wallet, perhaps my cool, maybe consciousness).

All these principles play through and against each other. Imagine someone who is ill and weak and needs to eat. Having taken the food in, he locks in order to keep, but illness is weakness and he loses it: gives passively. Or look at us. I am speaking to you, want to actively give but realize that those two people in the back are laughing and not paying attention. I try to ignore them and become more active, but their behavior enters my body against my will (passively), builds up to the point of my losing it and I explode (quite actively): “Stop acting like this!” You can imagine, the combinations are endless, but I do not want to turn this into an acting course. But all this applies to dance as well, at least, or especially, to the dance that, to my understanding, was taught by Mary Wigman. Thus, after having heard from the poet and the actor/ mime, let's listen to what she has to say:

Mary Wigman Recorded Voice:

Zeit, Kraft und Raum, das sind die Elemente, aus denen der Tanz lebt. Im Dreigestirn dieser elementaren Kräfte aber ist der Raum der eigentliche Wirkungsbereich des Tänzers, der ihm gehört, weil er ihn gestaltet. Nicht der greifbare, der begrenzte und begrenzende Raum der konkreten Wirklichkeiten, sondern der imaginäre, der irrationale

Raum der tänzerischen Expansion, der die Grenzen der Körperlichkeit aufzuheben vermag und der ins Fließen gebrachten Gebärde eine scheinbare Unendlichkeit verleiht, in der sie sich zu verstrahlen, zu verströmen, zu verhauchen scheint.ⁱⁱ

Gottschild Speaking:

Here is the translation: "Time, force, and space: these are the elements that give the dance its life. Of this trinity of elemental forces, it is space which is the dancer's actual sphere of activity, which belongs to him because he creates it. Not the tangible, the limited and limiting space of concrete reality, but the imaginary, irrational space of the danced expansion, that space which can erase the boundaries of all corporeality and can turn the gesture, flowing as it is into an image of seeming endlessness in which it seems to lose itself in self-completion, to radiate, to flow out, to breathe itself away."

Mary Wigman—going beyond Barrault—sees the living, energized, and unlimited space not only as extension of self but as a partner, so equal to herself that she speaks of her marriage with it. She has the desire to give herself to it, "sich zu verstrahlen, zu verströmen, zu verhauchen,"—to radiate herself into it; to flow, pour, out into it; to breathe herself away.

Radiating, pouring out, breathing oneself away. . .

Those words are about giving, giving oneself, giving of oneself, giving oneself up, in the end of dissolving oneself. I must say, they touch me deeply. That is, today. I admit that, as her student, I had largely dismissed them as flowery speech. But then, after coming to America and seeing everyone dancing *t h r o u g h* but hardly anyone *w i t h* the space, I discovered that my body had been more receptive to her teaching than my brain, had understood and internalized without my even realizing it. "Yes, this is what I feel, desire, do in my best moments!"



Gotschild's performance-lecture at the Akademie der Künste, Berlin (November 11th, 2006)

In our daily lives we tend to conceive of space and spaces as neutral containers, immobile like aquariums in which we swim around, so to speak, and that we fill with our activities. Here another German term: we call real estate 'immobilien', space that is immobile and can be divided up, sold, and owned (like my house in Philadelphia), not Mary Wigman's moving, receiving and answering space.

Gotschild Recorded Voice:

Mary, the mystic, called her living space 'imaginary' and 'irrational.' Now, three generations later, I see it as quite real. In Wigman's time, 'energy' was not the household word it is now. But that's, of course, what it is: energy. We have all heard about or perhaps practiced how the martial arts focus and direct the 'ki' or 'chi' inside the human body. It is a skill that can be learned, in other words: technique; a technique, however, which emphasizes openness and receptivity rather than effort and virtuosity. By the way, we can find the same emphasis in Contact Improvisation (it is interesting that we call the latter 'improvisation' even though it is technique: im-providere: the

unforeseen which we want to allow for). In my opinion, it is this very energy, extended past the limits of the skin and into the space of which Barrault, Wigman, and now I, are speaking. Sensitizing one's perception is in my view not mystical experience but technique, a technique that, most of all, requires listening. And in order to listen we have to create. . . *S I L E N C E*.

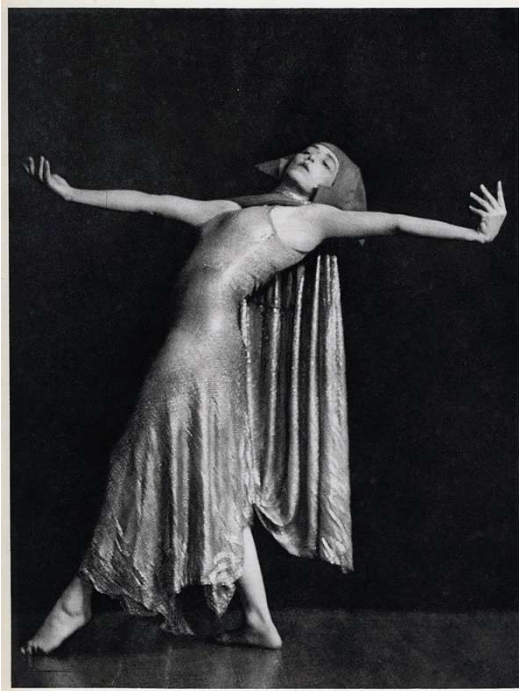
Gottschild Speaking:

When I speak of silence, I do not only refer to the absence of sound. I mean an external and internal silence in which the onslaught of attitudes, habits, intentions, vanities come to rest. Only in silence do I become aware of my breathing which is exchange. Only in silence can I listen to my heartbeat: [*using breath and voice to recreate the rhythm of heartbeat*] short—long.., short—long.., short—long.., the iambic rhythm of poetry. Only in silence can I sense the flow of my blood, that is, the flow of time. . . toward death and that scares us. Consequently, we make noise: acoustic noise, visual noise, all kinds of noises. But only in silence can we sense and receive those vibrations and impulses from the in—or the outside—that make us do, make us move, make us dance. . .that dance us.

My dance troupe was called *ZeroMoving* and often people asked me for the meaning of that name. After all, 'zero' means 'nothing.' Nothing moving? Do you not move? Well, the word 'zero' comes from Arabic and translates, amongst other things, into 'empty. The empty moving? What's that? For the dancer it means: let go. Let go, at least for the time being, of skills and attitudes in which you like yourself and feel secure, habits and preferences, even certain goals, in order to find ways that are not already pre-programmed in your head. For the choreographer going to this point, zero opens the possibility to discover the language that each new work demands. In other words, empty is not nothing. I look into a container and it is empty. What I see is not nothing. I see more of the container. [*gazing into the volume of nothingness he cradles in his hands*]

Like the *ZeroMoving*, space is not nothing. Imagine for a moment that we are not surrounded by air but by water. We feel its resistance and how its current moves us.

Every active movement I make ripples the water infinitely. I do not know when and where that movement comes to rest. If you are in its path, you will be moved. If you move actively, I shall receive your movement and be moved. If I resist—well that, too, is movement. I cannot be not affected. Energy moving through space, moving space, I believe, can equally be sensed by us. But back to silence. In her *The Language of Dance*, Wigman appeals to us :



Mary Wigman, untitled (circa 1928);
photo by Charlotte Rudolph

Mary Wigman Recorded Voice:

" . . .Und nun lassen Sie uns ein wenig leise und behutsam sein! Denn wir wollen das Reich des Schöpferischen betreten, den Raum, in dem Gestaltbergendes und Gestaltsuchendes sich ständig umkreisen, sich verweben und in dämmernder Versponnenheit auf den Lichteinfall warten, der ihnen Farbe und Umriss gibt und sie zum Bild erhellt. Wer die Unbedenklichkeit besäße, mit der grellen Suchlampe der Neugier hier einzudringen, er fände nichts als ein nebelhaftes Gewoge. Denn dieser Raum verträgt den direkten Zugriff nicht.

Er bleibt den dinglichen Forderungen stumm. Er weiss noch nichts von Form, er kennt weder Name noch Zahl. Er lässt sich nichts abzwängen, er gehorcht keinem Befehl. Er ist der Raum der schöpferischen Bereitschaft und ist Sanktuarium. Darum lasst uns leise sein und lasst uns auf das Pochen und Klopfen des eigenen Herzens lauschen, auf das Raunen und Rauschen des eigenen Blutes, das diesem Raum die Stimme gibt.
P12ⁱⁱⁱ

Gottschild Translates:

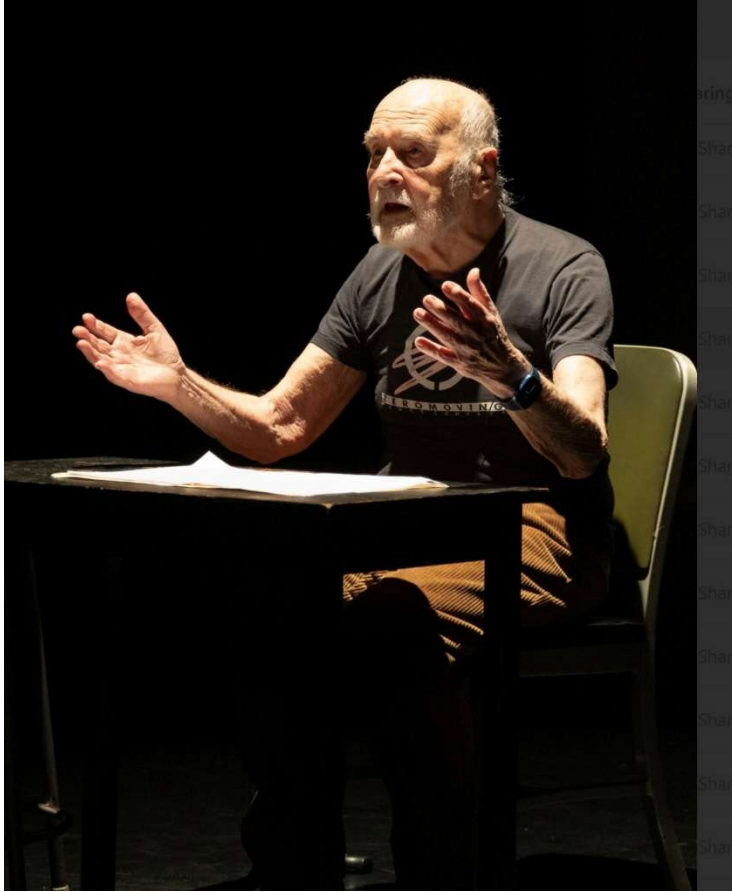
"And now let's lower our voices and be a bit wary! For we enter the realm of the creative

dimension, the space in which that, that conceals form, and that, that seeks it, circle one another, intertwine, and wait in the twilight of their dreaming for the light to come which lends them color and contour, making them visible and tangible. Whoever would thoughtlessly enter here with the blazing torch of curiosity would find little more than a mistily drifting cluster of images. For this space does not permit a direct approach. It remains silent to concrete demands. It knows not yet of form, it knows neither name nor number. It does not yield to force, it does not heed commands. It is the space of creative readiness and is sanctuary. Therefore, let us lower our voices and listen to the pulsebeat of our heart, to the whisper and murmur of our own blood, which gives voice to this space."

Gottschild Speaking:

She cautions us to be quiet, to listen, to not allow our seeking to become aggressive. Picasso comes to mind. Wasn't it he who said: I do not seek - I find? When I first read this, I thought: Can this man really be so arrogant as to believe that he does not have to work by the sweat of his brow like other mortals in order to receive gifts from the gods? Did he feel that he was so much above other human beings that he did not have to do the work of seeking in order to find? The Old High German 'findan' from which 'to find' is derived, originally meant 'to step,' 'to walk,' to come about that that lies by the wayside. In order to not miss it, Mary says, we do have to lower our voices, step carefully, and let go of expectations. And, over time, my own experience taught me: when you seek, you seek for something, something particular that fills the mold you already carry in your head. You will not be open for, may even step on and break the gift that is there for the finding. And it will have been your own intentionality that blocked your way.

Stepping, walking, finding, inventing, creating - they are all terms of movement. Indeed, this uncovering without seeking springs from mobility, physical but not only physical. Its premise is the readiness to let go of what feels safe because it is familiar, to take risks, to nimbly change perspective - also to escape when necessary.



Gottschild at Temple Dance
Department's 50th Anniversary,
Conwell Dance Theatre (April 26,
2025); photo by Shannon Bramham

When I grew up, having a point of view, sticking to and defending it, come hell or high water, was seen as an indicator of a strong character. Well, if I ever believed this, I don't anymore. A position assumed yesterday may be old hat today, and an old hat has to be lifted occasionally to check whether the air underneath hasn't become stale. I pray that I will always be able to lift my hat, open my shirt, feel the wind on my skin, be agile enough to alter my stance in reaction to its touch so that I can keep receiving that which is yet unknown to me and those who are still unknown to me. But for this I must not only open my shirt but also my hand. "I have no weapons. I want to receive you and give myself to you, learn about you, learn from you, am not going to punch you."

Gottschild Recorded Voice:

So often we try to get a grasp on the unfamiliar by simply filing it away under familiar categories. We seek to 'stand above' that that is to be 'under-stood' and, thereby, fail to enrich ourselves by meeting that we do not know on its own terms. An aside: how

often have we, all of us, individually and collectively, met others—persons, peoples, and entire cultures—not with empty hands and ready to touch and be touched but with the clenched fist of biased self-assuredness.

Gottschild Speaking:

Dance, the art form that, at least in its Western incarnation, has always presented itself so damned sure and untouchable in its perfection. I want it touchable. I want it to be like making love. Making love is touching, isn't it? It only works when both partners keep themselves open to touch, to giving and receiving, physically, emotionally, and, I believe, also spiritually. It only works if both listen to each other and to the present and if both are willing to deviate from what they may have imagined, expected, maybe even planned in order that they can find that that lies by their wayside.

I believe that dance, that performance, can be like this and wish that they would be like this.

~END~

ⁱ Jean-Louis Barrault, "About the Actor", *The Theatre of Jean-Louis Barrault*, trans. Joseph Chiari, (London: Barrie Books Ltd., 1961), p. 60

ⁱⁱ Mary Wigman – *Tanzerlebnis Und Tanzgestaltung*, Recording, Vinyl, 33 ⅓ RPM, Limited Edition, (Hamburg, Germany: Deutschen Grammophon Gesellschaft, 1962)
Text is also found in Mary Wigman, *Die Sprache des Tanzes* (Stuttgart: Ernst Battenberg Verlag, 1963), p.12

ⁱⁱⁱ Ibid.

An earlier version of this lecture-performance, comprising lecture, gesture, and movement, was presented at Oberlin College in 2000 and further developed over the next few years including an invited performance on November 11th, 2006, at Akademie der Künste in Berlin for the celebration of the 120th anniversary of Mary Wigman's birth. This text represents the most current version of the earlier lecture-performance and was presented as a reading at Temple University Dance Department's 50th Anniversary on April 26, 2025. Gottschild, seated at a table in a spotlight, both read and spoke, drawing on his expressive command of voice, face, body, and gesture to illustrate and underscore the theoretical, physical, and emotional nature of the work. Dr. Brenda Dixon Gottschild provided dramaturgical support for this presentation. Dr. Linda Caruso Haviland provided audio tech for the presentation and text preparation for publication.