

‘There was never anythin’ like this!!!’

Valeska Gert’s Performances in the Context of Weimar Culture

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The Weimar period was one of liberation and cultural renewal, and the complexity of Weimar life was reflected in, and through, its diverse body culture. The newly established modern dance, which defied the overbearing ballet tradition and sought to create a style of its own, stood out as historically and culturally distinct. Of all modern dancers working in Germany, Valeska Gert was undoubtedly one of the most critical and pervasive minds, feared and lauded for her unadulterated expression of the modern age. She was also one of the most deeply ensconced in various avant-garde movements, notably through the media of theatre, film and literature. As a dancer and actress, Gert collaborated on productions by renowned artists such as Federico Fellini (*Juliet of the Spirits*), Frank Wedekind (*Franziska*), Georg Wilhelm Pabst (*The Joyless Street*) and Bertolt Brecht (*The Threepenny Opera*). As a vehement advocate of cutting-edge creative trends, she exerted a considerable influence on the modern dance scene and on Germany’s, and in particular Berlin’s, cultural life. She also drew some important critical impulses from the diverse artistic contexts of the time, such as Dadaism.¹

Gert’s dances documented a response to the challenges of a modern, multifaceted reality, notably of metropolitan life. The radically fragmentary and pluralistic nature of much of her choreography leaves a sense of uneasiness about any classification—whether expressionist, dadaist or realist—and points at Gert’s versatility as an artist as well as her refusal to be pigeonholed. Gert repudiated what she called the moralising, unintellectual and boring performances of the Wigman school²:

Woe betide the dancer whose mind dares to cut capers. Mind is taken here for intellectualism, intellectualism for mind. A dance performance must smell like sour sweat, be ethical, confused and boring. . . . Because the average German does not have self-confidence, they only deem art grand which they do not understand and which bores them. Mary Wigman is the only dancer who fulfils all the needs of the German educated middle class and has therefore become the national dancer.³

The revisionist, anti-bourgeois message of Gert's performances—she famously declared that she aimed at destructing our “old,” “crumbling” world and helping to construct a “new life”⁴—reached beyond the scope of the socially more affirmative approaches of dancers such as Mary Wigman and the Austrian Grete Wiesenthal. Some of Wigman's works, admittedly, had challenged spectators' expectations of a female dancing style by using abrupt, jerky movements and forceful gestures, thereby abandoning gracefulness (for instance in the famous *Witch Dance*). Gert went much further, however, in radicalising dance by incorporating elements of the grotesque and of social satire, and by making extensive use of dramatic and pantomimic techniques.

GERT'S CHOREOGRAPHIC THEMES

Gert's dances encompassed a wide spectrum of subject-matters drawn from an equally diverse array of contexts, many of which exploded the boundaries of what was then acceptable in art. She embodied persons and inanimate objects and states of being, such as, for instance, a wet

nurse, cinema with *Wochenschau* (weekly newsreel) excerpts, sports, circus, death and ballet, most of which she portrayed in a parodied or satirical way. This section will examine how the themes of her dances related to cultural issues which shaped life in the Weimar period. I shall focus on a few main tendencies in her work: the presentation of the marginalised, Americanism and her portrayal of technology and urban life.

Gert was one of a number of Weimar artists—others included George Grosz, Käthe Kollwitz and Bertolt Brecht—who chose to portray those marginalised or excluded from bourgeois society. Gert's often parodic or ironic representation of social exiles was seemingly designed to revindicate these figures, as well as to shock the middle-classes: "And because I did not love the bourgeois, I danced those despised by him: prostitutes, matchmakers, the fallen and the outcast."⁵ Probably the best known of these roles is *Canaille* (here: a female prostitute). Gert's portrayal of this figure is significant at a time when German state regulation of prostitution, which involved the supervision of sex-workers by the *Sittenpolizei* (moral police) and severe limitations on their freedom, became increasingly attacked as incompatible with the new democratic system and moves towards greater legal and civil rights for women. The regulation policy was in fact abolished in 1927.⁶

Gert's unvarnished and ruthless depiction of the prostitute renounced any idealisation. Everyday life—and misery—were reinstated over and above the aestheticised life previously represented in much dance, in particular classical ballet with its fairy-tale plots and noble, dignified representation of humanity. Kurt Tucholsky described Gert's appearance as *Canaille* in a rhetorically rich review in the *Weltbühne* (1921) as follows:

Into the circle of light slinks a slut in black, the red neck-trimming covering the head—a seedy, ungroomed head. Who is this? What kind of face is it? The ‘suburban prostitute’ by Toulouse-Lautrec is a countess by comparison with this tart.

Indifferently she pushes up her shoulder blades—indifferently this hired piece of meat from the display cabinet pushes itself across the street. And is seized by a guy—and produces the most infamous thing ever done on stage. The legs open and close. And indifference, convulsion—convulsion nevertheless!—and greed for money shake this abused body: syphilis and the Salvation Army fight with equal ardour for this poor soul. Whoever has longed for the vices at the ‘infamous Berlin nude dances’: here they are. And I have never grasped so well how lust and agony are part and parcel of the same. And then she exhales the last lust, pretends to spit—and vanishes.⁷

As Ramsay Burt has argued, Gert did not simply interpret this role as a critique of capitalist society and its treatment of woman as a will-less and submissive commodity. Rather, she strove to depict the female experience in a somewhat autonomous light, with the prostitute enjoying considerable control over her sexuality.⁸ On the other hand, a little film snippet by Suse Byk captures how the character’s eyes roll up—accompanying a provocative body gesture—to display only the whites while the pupils disappear under the eyelids.⁹ Pupils are distinctive markers of the individual’s identity and establish his or her connection with the outside world; their disappearance gives Gert’s character an eerie and somewhat inhuman edge.

The ambiguity of the stage role was indeed a reflection of the figure of the contemporary prostitute herself. On the one hand, prostitutes could be seen as career women: independent both financially and emotionally. On the other hand, even during the First World

War, brothels had been organised to satisfy the erotic needs of battlefield soldiers and to maximise their fighting efficiency—by order of the German High Command. This had been done in a strictly unsentimental and mechanised manner. Gert mirrored a tendency in the treatment of sexual matters during the Weimar Republic, namely, the rationalisation of sexuality and the decline of any romantic ideology. A prostitute, she claimed, knows how to separate “physical things from these sentimentalities mistakenly called love.”¹⁰ Berlin’s frivolous nightly dance entertainment (with Anita Berber’s artistic nude dances only the tip of the iceberg) and the wild excesses of sexual licence testify to the view that, in Max Weber’s words, the time produced “sensualists without heart.”¹¹

By drawing on the commonplace but largely ignored dark aspects of quotidian life, Gert’s work contributed to an innovative dance aesthetic within the modern dance movement. She redefined the image of the female on stage and redeployed the framework within which production and reception of dance had previously been undertaken, even by contemporary artists. In various theoretical treatises, Gert criticised the fact that the overall trend of *Ausdruckstanz* (German expressive dance) was directed away from concrete art, which draws its substance from life itself, towards an aestheticism that was out of touch with reality. Gert openly expressed her resentment of dances which revolved around abstracts or symbols, and attacked Mary Wigman for featuring works entitled *Circle* or *Cry* in her dance programmes.¹² Her rejection of visionary Expressionism paralleled or even anticipated general cultural developments in the Weimar Republic, as by the middle of the Twenties Expressionism—still dominant in the first, politically unstable years of the Republic—had given way to a new objectivity (*Neue Sachlichkeit*). Advocates of this new trend sought to replace the Expressionists’ abstract notions of humanity with a grittier recognition of the true nature of the modern, technological age. Some artists used this move towards greater matter-of-factness as an opportunity for social criticism, offering unvarnished accounts of the dark underbelly of

bourgeois life. Gert specifically sought a catharsis of traditional attitudes and preconceptions and strove to unsettle those who, for reasons of convention, unquestioningly accepted the values of the bourgeoisie. In her words, the dancer “has the task of frightening the hypocrite [bourgeois] and showing him his ugly face in a distorting mirror and to rouse those willing to collaborate and to vitalize them into action.”¹³

It is obvious even to a twenty-first-century audience that dances such as *Canaille* or *The Matchmaker*, which portrayed the sad and sorry figure of an ageing streetwalker who does business by pairing young people, presented figures marginalised in bourgeois society. Other works, however, did not contain such an overt discourse of ‘otherness.’ Gert’s dances dealt with a series of cultural issues that shaped the Weimar period, and what critics generally admired in her work was the vivid evocation of various other dimensions of modern urban life, besides prostitution, such as cinema, sport and technology. Many of these were seen as inimical to traditional German values and beliefs. Paradigms of this trend, which have evaded the attention of researchers on the topic,¹⁴ include the spectrum of dances dedicated to ‘Americanism,’ which in the Weimar Republic was widely regarded as a *chiffre* of unreserved modernity.¹⁵ Lauded by some for its liberation from the burden of tradition, it was conceived by others, predominantly right-wing intellectuals, as posing a threat to *völkische* values. In his erudite monograph on Weimar literature, Midgley documents a variety of sceptical voices expressing their antipathy to the American lifestyle, among them Feuchtwanger, Spengler, and Fritz Giese in his book on *Girllkultur*.¹⁶

Valeska Gert not only openly declared her affinity with the American life-style by having her hair cut in a bob (“*Bubikopf*”); she also made her interest in American culture explicit in her dances. For instance, in *Vaudeville*, she portrayed juggling, conjuring tricks and dancing on a tightrope in a clear reference to the variety theatres currently flourishing in

North America. In *Negro Dance*, for which she chose a close-fitting garment and—with the exception of a white brim around the hat, white socks and a necklace—was dressed entirely in black, she sought to expose an aspect of what she regarded as German petty-mindedness and moral backwardness. Although black dance was extremely fashionable in the Ragtime-Jazz era, its wild character aroused widespread allegations of indecency and immorality. In particular the popular Charleston, with its frenzied swinging arms and side kicks, was frequently viewed with suspicion.

Negro Dance stands out from Gert's other American dances in that it addressed both cultural and racial differences. Some modern dancers had patriotically represented their nation in their choreographies, such as Isadora Duncan in the role of Lady Liberty. By contrast, Gert's incorporation of a foreign, faraway country and a race which was often considered inferior raised her depiction of otherness to a new height. In the mid to late Twenties, Europe celebrated the dancing sensation Josephine Baker who also performed in Berlin's dance halls. She was seen as the incarnation of the black dance entertainer, and responded to audience expectations by wearing her famous banana skirt, allegedly consisting of sixteen bananas: a rather unambiguous pointer to the primeval, animalistic and erotic. What gives Gert's dance its peculiar poignancy and sets her apart from the famous 'original,' however, is the fact that she did not even attempt to create the illusion of being of black origin by wearing a mask or make-up. Instead, she blurred the boundaries between the races by appearing as a 'white negro,'¹⁷ and thus displayed, or anticipated, a form of racial and cultural assimilation that most probably challenged even those open-minded thinkers who eagerly awaited a liberalisation of the German culture and populace in the wake of World War I.

Gert's refusal to conform to a German sense of national identity, and to submit to a yearning for national security by portraying only the familiar domestic realm, illustrates that not all inter-war German modern dance was nationalistic, even though events during the Third

Reich led to its often being interpreted as such. The new spirit that Gert captured with her American dances was equated, by highbrow critics, with a lack of cultural sophistication. Gert's biographer, the editor and author Fred Hildenbrandt, alternately calls her "uncultivated," "unmusical" and "superficial" when writing about her interest in American culture: "She does not want to have anything to do with art and the ancient ideals of art."¹⁸ His review underlines the fact that modernity, undoubtedly a hallmark of Gert's dances, is perceived as at once threatening and fascinating.

Gert's enthusiasm for the outlook of modern city life is reflected in her representation of a multitude of sports in her dances, which constitute another crucial aspect of the American influence on Europe. Despite the strong emphasis on body culture and gymnastics, sports in 1920s Germany did not play a significant role in shaping national identity; they were, instead, regarded as a "method of Americanisation."¹⁹ The gymnast Fritz Wildung was eager to distinguish sport, as a phenomenon alien to German culture, from more traditional forms of physical exercise which he saw as intertwined with German mentality: "Sport in Germany is incidentally still too new and too little rooted in the character of the German people to make it possible to point to a definition that has grown organically from the German way of life."²⁰ Gert's caricatural and energetic presentation of various forms of sport, including swimming, ice-skating, tennis, football and boxing, captured the American spirit. Hildenbrandt describes her dance in great detail:

Then she dances sport, and there again everything is improvised, she glides close and is very careful because she is on skates and has to do very difficult things, she leans towards the one and towards the other side and bends herself and keeps the feet very nicely in place. And she also walks on the skis and is peculiar and very expert and

precisely stiff while doing it and pushes the skis ahead of her and also tries the Telemark a little. . . . She dances a cycle racing . . . and already her legs are engaged in melancholic and enthusiastic and quick pedalling and pedalling and pedalling. She dances swimming, and the water swirls around her, and she lies in it and has the eyes closed and the mouth shut and occasionally opens it a little and spits out a bit of water and dips the skull straightaway back into the element. She dances foil fencing and takes up the position daintily, the one hand on the back and the other with the foil, and she has an enormous opponent, whom she will have to defeat in a life-and-death struggle whatever the cost.²¹

By dancing sport, Gert drew her audiences' attention to a combination of associations and clichés which revolved around the dynamism of the rising generation on the one hand, and a resistance to German identity on the other, conveying a sense of internationalism rather than national community. Moreover, as a young woman who performed sport on stage, Gert was closely associated with the image of the 'American girl,'²² which is thus depicted (and stylised) by Jean Cocteau: "The United States evokes a girl more interested in her health than in her beauty. She swims, boxes, dances, leaps onto moving trains—all without knowing that she is beautiful."²³ Cocteau drew on this idea in the scenario for *Parade*, which was premiered in 1917 by Diaghilev's *Ballets Russes*. Here, the American girl displayed a virtually limitless physical energy, performing wild jumps and stunts in a sideshow company.

Gert's performances, in which she presented extracts of different sports by reducing them to their most fundamental movements at a very fast tempo, reflect the dynamic model of Cocteau's American girl as a paradigm for the modern age. Yet, this girl not only delivers an image of health, strength and unlimited possibilities for women's freedom; the portrayal

might also have appeared despiritualised, overly assertive and even threatening, in particular when viewed from a male perspective. Indeed, Elizabeth Hutton Turner's claim that the confident American girl was a "male fantasy"²⁴ could be regarded as double-edged, given the period of considerable male insecurity in the face of the female emancipation movement. One should bear in mind that German women had recently, namely in 1918, during the period of Gert's early career, gained the right to vote and stand in elections. Moreover, due to the severe shortage of men of marriageable age resulting from the war losses, a large number of women were now in the employment market.

It can be argued that for many generations, women had served to entertain the illusion of a holistic and domestic existence. Correspondingly, even within the field of modern dance, many female artists, such as the Austrian Grete Wiesenthal, conformed to traditional expectations of femininity by creating works which evoked notions of totality and harmony. In Weimar Germany, however, the image of the emancipated and self-assertive American woman became more widely disseminated, for instance in the media. Some of Gert's dances may be seen as reflecting this trend; in provocative response to more traditionalist images of the female dancer, she took recourse to modern expressions of life, such as sport, which were associated with proactivity and forcefulness. Gert thus eluded old-fashioned, romantic images of femininity, and presented her body as a repository for the fears of those wedded to the status quo.

It is revealing that in contrast to 'mystical' expressive dancers,²⁵ Gert's works were hardly ever located in the peace and tranquillity of free nature. Rather, she presented excerpts from Berlin city life and scenes taken from the technological domain: "stamping machines,"²⁶ planes and neon signs, *Cinema* and *Traffic*. Indeed, even in dances which did not entail a direct allusion to technology, she likened her rhythm to pitching machinery: "My rhythm became pounding until I stamped like an engine."²⁷ With this choice of subject matter, Gert

reacted to the process of rapid technological advance after the First World War, which signalled Germany's economic recovery. However, as a symptom of a world bereft of individual personalities, technology, like urbanity, gave rise to a number of ambivalent sentiments. This period produced impressive warnings about industrialisation.²⁸ The modern dance scene reacted to the changes by choreographing works revolving around the machine, often taking a negative stance towards industrial modernisation. Examples include Gertrud Bodenwieser's *Demon Machine* (1924), which captured the dehumanising effects of machinery on the human being, or the devilish robot's dance in Fritz Lang's epoch-making film *Metropolis* (1927).

Many of Gert's dances alluded to modern technology, but in contrast to other choreographers of her era, her view on these developments was primarily diagnostic and therefore a lot less judgmental. Obviously fascinated by modern civilisation, she presented a bundle of themes that were connected through the idea of accelerated, intensified and interrupted motion, such as in *Cinema*, *Traffic*, and *Nervousness*. Since Frederick Taylor's 1911 book on industrial management, time and motion studies had become a major concern of modern industrial society. The reductionist approach of breaking tasks down into smaller components translated into a different, specific movement style. Despite the eager attempts of the *Verein Deutscher Ingenieure* (Association of German Engineers) to promote Taylor's ideas, German industry was reluctant to take them up.²⁹ Gert, however, was more than willing to experiment by distilling motions into more simplified forms in the realm of dance. In a spirit not too far removed from Taylor's, Gert made it her task to reduce every movement to its bare essentials, eschewing anything extraneous or merely decorative. In *Traffic*, Gert extracted scenes from Berlin traffic—cars, policemen, accidents, neon signs and traffic jams—in a reductionist manner, limiting herself to a series of short symbolic gestures to portray a rapid sequence of everyday events. This dance reflected the overwhelming,

multifarious experiences of urban life; Berlin was then the third largest city in the world. Similarly, in *Cinema*, she danced trickfilm illustrators, a hand-cranking film-operator and the fast gait of pedestrians. Mirroring the imperfect picture quality of early film, their movements looked flickering and somewhat disjointed.

In these dances, Gert diagnosed what she considered a typical feature of her time, namely “*Unausgeglichenheit*” (instability).³⁰ Reflected for instance in “the nervousness and hurry of the passersby,”³¹ the fast tempo and jerky movements illustrated that, in Sigmund Freud’s words, human beings “have become ‘neurotic’ as a result of their aspirations to civilization.”³² Although by no means as sceptical as Freud in her evaluation of modernity and its impact on human nature, Gert transformed this psychological state into a short dance, entitled *Nervousness*, in which she made the movements “so fast that they looked like a convulsion, like the mad essence of nervousness.”³³ With her head tossed forward, she pressed both her hands against her temples as if to prevent her head from bursting, an iconographic sign signalling the over-stimulation of the brain and senses. The legs’ detachment from the body, moreover, possibly illustrated the oft-lamented detrimental effects of office and factory work on human body posture.

THE STYLE AND PRESENTATION OF GERT’S DANCES

Valeska, I have often chucked stewed plums in your mug,
Sometimes sour as vinegar, sometimes sweet as syrup, as the case may be.
You have aped me as Messalina, Tango-girl and whore—
So much so, that I thought: now her leggings are surely torn apart!

Paul Mürich swots me up on the foxtrot. I see a barre on the wall.

‘At this’, says the master, ‘Valeska Gert still practises eagerly today!’

As I inspect the barre, I feel sorry for throwing my fruit;

And for long I observe it, with my pupils, strokingly and more strokingly.

You shiny smoothness—here her grotesque fingers closed in an iron grip!

Here her hambone shot up into the daringness of the ninetieth degree!

Oooh, Oskar Bie, Frank Thieß, A.H. Kober, Karlernst Knatz—

You have no idea how a silver whistle echoes on this barre.

This I now carry happily inside me and suck like liquorice,

Like a stick of liquorice which I solemnly pull longer than long,

While chanting: among us among is Valeska among!

Not every century could possess such a terpsichoric miracle!

Men at most chase after a female waist.

Everywhere the scouts extend like rays.

Lovers have always teased each other with stewed plums.

Oh my circus horse, Tango-girl, sweet scoundrel!

Alfred Richard Meyer, “Valeska Gert.”³⁴

This poem presents an interesting poetic reflection of Gert’s dance aesthetics both in content and style. On the face of it, Meyer’s “Valeska Gert” seems comparatively conventional, and

fairly traditional in formal terms—with its regular structure of five quatrains and embracing rhymes. It does, however, address various factors related to the dancer's performances, such as the response of the audience, the furore aroused by what was seen by the Weimar public as inexorably provocative and indecent, and the listing of a few dance numbers in the last line. Foremost and above all, it offers a successful rhetorical and stylistic translation of Gert's kinetic and aesthetic mode of expression.

Meyer's literary response to the dance experience is clearly modelled on the inherent structure of Gert's performances. By making individual lines self-contained (particularly in stanzas 2 and 5), and in the frequent use of asyndeta and the thematic-semantic disjunction of lines, the poem adopts two of Gert's most central stylistic traits. Firstly, Gert made use of montage in the medium of dance. She mirrored the immediate, disconnected and multilayered experiences of city-life in her dances through a rapid and sudden stringing together of extracts from various topics, or different aspects of one scenario. Gert's technique of using short sequences of pantomimic gestures and dance steps, for instance in *Traffic*, reverberates in the montage-like structure of Meyer's poem. Another hallmark of Gert's works is the principle of interruption, which distinguishes her dance-style sharply from the transitory sequence of movement intrinsic to many modern dances, and which is reflected by Meyer's asyndetic style. With the juxtaposition of contrasting movements, Gert sought to convey a sense of the perceived reality of the modern age, a technique that was known to the Weimar public through cinema. Thus, her kinetic repertory as well as her subject matter sought to mirror the issues of her time.

An excerpt from *The Matchmaker*, filmed by Suse Byk, captures Gert throwing her legs in wild, disruptive and jerk-like movements into the air, accompanied by harsh facial gestures: grimacing and twisting her eyes. This, or a similar dance, might have induced Meyer to comment humorously on Gert's torn leggings. Other characteristics of her dance-style that

emerge from this cinematic example are the principles of alienation and dissonance, and Meyer gives a vivid poetic account of this crucial aspect of the genre of the grotesque, in which Gert was a groundbreaking figure. He employs a variety of uncommon rhetorical figures and tropes, next to more conventional ones such as alliteration and internal rhyme. The former serve to defy the principle of clarity (*perspicuitas*); they include synaesthesia (“*silberner Pfiff*”), pleonasm (“*blanke Glätte*”), and a number of curious metaphors (“*den . . . lutsche ich nun wie Lakritzen*”). In addition to this employment of unusual visual imagery, Meyer confronts the reader with unconventional grammatical constructions, such as the formation of incorrect plurals (“*Kompöttern*”) and the comparative form of a participle adverb (“*streichelnd und streichelnder*”).

Another central stylistic feature of Gert’s artistic intention, which has not been highlighted by previous research, was her recourse to lower or light, cabaret-style forms of entertainment, which she deployed to undermine the distinction between high and low culture. As explained earlier, Gert’s choice of subject matters displayed an affinity for ‘low’ milieus, either through depicting outcasts from society, or by touching on topics concerning light entertainment (music hall, variety-shows and circus). Gert mocked the pretensions of highbrow, bourgeois art by choreographing her performances in a way which reflected the *stilus humile* rather than any more sophisticated stylistic genre. For instance, she repudiated classical accompaniment in favour of musical styles or instruments which were associated with convivial entertainment or street fairs: march or social-dance music, hurdy-gurdy and accordion. Similarly, her verbal contributions on stage were usually characterised by a simplified, colloquial mode of diction. The undated and, to my knowledge, unpublished *Tanzlied* (probably 1950–52) from the Berlin *Academy of the Arts* (Gert archive, 204), which was written and recited by the dancer herself, is an intriguing example:

You see here in colourful pictures

The life of Valeska Gert.

You see it from the beginning,

And not in reverse.

Here you see Valeska

As a baby small and delicate,

In its first g e s t u r e s

So o o sweet and so attractive.

The great war—and many worries

And finally dance—‘the dance of tomorrow’ -

She was now a woman—and a film star

S h e danced—and one screamed:

There was never anythin’ like this!!! [...]

But always d a n c e, in each form

She explodes the boundaries, explodes the norm,

She dances the day of the whore, the poet,

She dances the sin and the p r a y e r. [...]

You saw here in some pictures the life of V.G.

And can always s e e her again

When she gives out at the *Hexenküche*³⁵:

She shows you people as they are,

The true and the bad.

She dances the sinful and the just,
Come right in, right in, and don't be shy!

Though no further illustrations or recordings of this piece have come down to us, the interaction of visual imagery (pictures) and rather simplistic verbal commentary is a crucial characteristic of street ballads. Performances of street ballads, or *Bänkelsang*, as they are termed in the German language, developed during the course of the seventeenth century and had their heyday in the 1800s. Denoting stories in prose or rhymed songs, street ballads were recited by wandering showmen at fairs who accompanied their tale musically with a barrel organ and visually with a series of tableaux at which they pointed with a stick. The often moralising presentation was aimed at the lower (middle) classes, a section of the population which was predominantly illiterate.

Gert's *Tanzlied* draws on the street ballad's simplistic texture by retaining its basic paratactic syntax and by using verbal expressions which extend to dialectal idioms such as "So watt war noch nie da." This stylistic particularity was indeed adopted by Meyer, whose "Valeska Gert" is strongly coloured by Berlin dialect ("in die Visage geschmissen," "paukt . . . intus," "mang uns mang ist Valeska mang"). It is important, in any assessment of Gert's artistic oeuvre, to consider the paradigm shift in her understanding of art, away from the visionary and sophisticated qualities of artistic trends such as Expressionism, and towards conventionally lower forms of culture. This takes us to the heart of her methodological approach to dance: the renunciation both of the idealised remoteness promoted by romantic and classical ballet, where the stage was populated by unearthly creatures such as sylphs or fairies; and of the abstract and mystic dimensions of dance, which many German expressive

dancers tried to capture. Rather than furthering the idea of utopianism, Gert adopted a cultural realism in her dances which reflected the contemporary world she inhabited.

The dialogic form of the *Tanzlied* and Gert's sometimes provocative experiments with audience reactions (for instance by inserting screams, or verbal commentary, into her dances), tie in with this notion of the low milieu, since they stand in contrast to the balletic ideas of stage illusion and of 'distance' between performers and audience. Though most modern dancers sought to rid themselves of the limitations engendered by this mode of stage presentation, they did not usually incorporate any straightforward (verbal or other) exchange between dancer and onlooker in their pieces. Once more, this peculiar instance of Gert's opposition to highbrow art is echoed in Meyer's poem. The direct address aimed at the dancer at the beginning of the poem ("Valeska, I have") and the use of the informal "du"-form indicate that Meyer sought to establish a sense of Gert's down-to-earth outlook on art while casting off any illusion of mystic transcendence. It is revealing, too, that the lyrical I is nearly always employed in concrete, often sensual contexts ("I see a barre on the wall").

While contemporary members of the audience were struck by the scenic qualities of Gert's dances, the more serious, acid undertone of social criticism was often hidden behind a smokescreen of jokey and clownesque behaviour: "'Hullabaloo', Klabund called her dance. Hullabaloo! That's right, but it does not suffice. 'Dirty joke'? Yes, but a higher dirty joke, as it were."³⁶ While drawing on folk humour and popular entertainment, the works often contained an implicit critique of the establishment and social authorities. Indeed, the subversive potential of some of Gert's dances was such that they attracted the attention of the police. The day after her first performance as a dancer in 1916, police officers came to check on the performers after reports of indecency and turmoil on stage. Gert herself noted that the audience "yelled, clapped, were disinhibited, threw objects at us," creating a scandal and

tainting, in the eyes of more conservative onlookers, the sacred space of the theatre.

Consequently, a Berlin theatre determined not to renew Gert's contract.³⁷

Gert's idea of dance was not that of a performer in front of a detached spectator. Instead, she created a somewhat comic and noisy marketplace atmosphere, which may be closely related to the carnival folk culture described by Mikhail Bakhtin in *Problems of Dostoevsky's Poetics* (1929) and *Rabelais and His World* (published in 1965). Indeed, Hildenbrandt draws on an analogy with carnivalesque and similar festive activities by depicting Gert as "a wild cracker . . . with a murderous noise,"³⁸ and her dances as "tomfoolery."³⁹ Though Gert undoubtedly was, by aspiration, a serious artist on a par with Wigman, her choreographies clearly transgressed the boundaries between serious ('ernste') art and light ('unterhaltende') entertainment, thus providing early examples of the fusion of low and high art in modern dance. This corresponds to the Bakhtinian notion of the carnival as involving a free mixture of opposites, high and low, serious and popular.

Further allusions may be drawn between Gert's style and the carnivalesque. In Bakhtin's words, the carnival was "the feast of becoming, change, and renewal. It was hostile to all that was immortalized and completed".⁴⁰ Gert, correspondingly, refused to comply with the classic aesthetic of perfection; her parodic performances were never fixed and stable, but were subject to a considerable degree of improvisation on the night of performance. For example, she reportedly varied her performances of *Canaille* depending on her mood.⁴¹ Similarly, as Bakhtin connotes the carnival with a "grotesque realism" that comprises a "lowering of all that is high, spiritual, ideal, abstract . . . to the sphere of earth and body,"⁴² so Gert's presentation of the material body emphasised features such as copulation, the belly and old age. This again opposed the classical model which tended to avoid allusions to the body's mortality and 'unclean' functions.

It is notable that Gert's corporeality was adapted to this mode of casting herself in plebeian, carnivalesque roles. By virtue of costume, make-up, and her kinetic repertory, Gert projected a grotesque, distorted image of the current *belle idéale* of the female onto stage. Wearing high-heeled shoes, strong-coloured dresses and heavy make-up, Gert stood out against both the dress-code of ballet (pointe shoes and tutu) and the earth-bound expressionist dancer, whose long-flowing, muted-coloured costume and practice of dancing barefoot were reminiscent of antique paragons. The avantgardist shock effect which Gert's dance style evoked in the audience was certainly partly engendered by her physical ugliness,⁴³ as well as her clipped, intense movements, as Hanns Schulze recorded in the aforementioned critique:

Like a mask. The face white-washed. Bright red mouth. Lascivious penetrating eye, flushed blue. Hair, tightly combed back, greasy shiny, drawn into a meagre bun. . . . The Gert is not beautiful. Rather ugly. She does not want to be beautiful at all. . . . Jerking and waving her limbs about. It is not pretty when her entire body begins to twitch, her belly circles, the arms beating the time and in the end her fat backside sticking in the air.⁴⁴ However! The Gert makes ugly things beautiful. Her dance is ugliness and also beauty.⁴⁵

By breaking away from beauty norms and stereotypically female behavioural patterns, Gert's performances questioned the widely held belief that it is beauty that justifies dance. Perhaps she thus commented on the ugliness of certain aspects of city-life and industrialisation, which she mirrored in her performances.

Contemporary critics coined the expression "grotesque dance" to find an encompassing label for Gert's unrivalled style. Some researchers on Gert reject the term, due to the

association of the grotesque with lower forms of entertainment⁴⁶—unjustifiably, in my opinion, as it was evidently Gert’s express intention to overcome the artificial boundary between high- and lowbrow art. The very fact that such researchers try to defend the dancer against ‘allegations’ of grotesqueness reveals a lot about the persistent German tendency to draw clear-cut distinctions between serious and ‘valuable’ art forms on one hand; and light and therefore less important ones on the other. It is indeed the grotesque which best embraces Gert’s presentation of corporeality, as a comparison with Bakhtin’s investigation of the grotesque body demonstrates:

It is not a closed, completed unit, it is unfinished, outgrows itself, transgresses its own limits. The stress is laid on those parts of the body that are open to the outside world. This means that the emphasis is on the apertures or the convexities, or on various ramifications and offshoots: the open mouth, the genital organs, the breasts, the phallus, the potbelly, the nose.⁴⁷

It takes little to show that this conceptualisation of the body finds a parallel in Gert’s stage dances. The photographic series *Matchmaker* by Suse Byk, for instance, confirms the emphasis Gert placed on exposed parts of the body, such as nose, eyes, and the open mouth (Fig. 1).⁴⁸ Above all, the displacement and movement of her breasts, an illusionary effect obtained by painting two circles on her dress on the upper part of the torso, is noteworthy. Gert’s experiments with the subversive power of transgressing one’s own anatomical boundaries resulted in the presentation of a monstrous and—by modern standards—‘lower’ form of corporeality: an anatomical miracle.⁴⁹

It has been argued that by presenting a body without a stable surface, one violates the norm of the limited, unambiguous and culturally-constructed body associated with the modern (i.e. post-medieval) age. Peter Stallybrass's claim that the grotesque body, in the modern age, is "subject to constant surveillance"⁵⁰ suggests that an open, grotesque corporeality is often perceived as a threat to the social order, and has a subversive potential. Gert's grotesqueness can therefore be seen as yet another stylistic means by which she subverted audience expectations.

Gert's performances displayed a radical experimentation quite foreign to the mystical dance conception of corporeality. They also promoted an instability of traditional identificatory concepts by deconstructing gender norms, and perhaps even questioning the notion of femininity altogether. How did they achieve this? First, the presentation of ugliness on stage in academic ballet in its later period (post-1800s) was a constituent and exclusive characteristic of the male *danseur de caractère*. By performing steps which were not devised to display beauty and grace, Gert thus adopted a traditionally male repertory of movement. Even more notable, however, is her transgression of gender boundaries through sexually ambiguous or clearly male-connoted dance scenes. For instance, Gert danced a bald-headed Chinaman wearing little pigtails, a clown, and a boxer—one of her most popular scenes for which a peculiar fascination must have arisen. Though boxing, in the Weimar Republic, was a sport played by women as well as men, Gert's dance *Boxing* obviously conveyed an image of masculinity (Fig. 2). A contemporary observer noted: "She dances 'Boxing', and one sees the boxer in the ring, sees the suppleness and skilfulness of beautiful trained male bodies, is startled by the blow to the stomach, the hook to the chin, the knock-out."⁵¹

Gert's grotesque dances thus provide striking examples of experimentation with gender. Gender swapping and drag were extremely popular in the early years of the Weimar

Republic, especially in Berlin's liberal climate, as one of its sternest critics, Stefan Zweig, recorded—much to his dismay.⁵² Many women, however, regarded the wearing of men's clothes as a radical and symbolic emancipatory act.⁵³ Whatever one's views on the matter—Gert's partly critical, partly witty perceptions and subversions of cultural practices clearly undermined expectations of the female gender, and may indeed be seen as presenting an androgynous body image which could not easily be classified as either male or female, thus questioning conventional gender divisions altogether. Hence, while Burt argues that Gert “presented the female dancing body in a way that corresponded to feminine experience,”⁵⁴ I contend that her performances opposed the notion of the female subject as a stable entity; instead suggesting a fluidity of identities which contested univocal gender attribution. Gert's ostensible emphasis on grotesque corporeality and gender ambiguity demonstrates that she rejected, and deconstructed, modern forms of subjectivity and identity. By using carnivalesque, popular forms of self-presentation, she undermined the distinction between high and low forms of culture. In the case of her African-American dances and even those revolving around sport, she withstood any attempt to propagate notions of racial or national ‘purity,’ which became so prevalent in 1930s Germany.⁵⁵ Finally, her presentation of the marginalised transgressed the boundaries of traditional dance themes while promoting a socially critical message. Gert thus used all the possibilities that the liberalism of the Weimar Republic could provide to experiment with gender, race, national identity and aesthetics, offering in return a unique kaleidoscope of Weimar images and themes that still retain relevance today.

Notes

¹ There is evidence that Gert maintained contacts with the Berlin Dadaists in 1919. In her autobiography *Ich bin eine Hexe: Kaleidoscop meines Lebens (I am a Witch: Kaleidoscope of my Life)*, she recalls, during a Dadaist matinee, having been drawn onto stage out of the audience, spontaneously to improvise a grotesque dance accompanied by the noises of a typewriter and a sewing machine, while still holding her paper shopping bag in her arms (Munich: Schleecluth, 1968), 60.

² Mary Wigman, a pupil of Rudolf von Laban and proponent of *Audruckstanz*, was one of Germany's foremost modern dance artists.

³ Valeska Gert, "Mary Wigman und Valeska Gert," *Der Querschnitt* 6.5 (1926): 361. The translations of all German texts, apart from those referenced in notes 20 and 21, are my own.

⁴ Gert, *Ich bin eine Hexe*, 46.

⁵ Valeska Gert, *Mein Weg* (Leipzig: Devrient, 1931), 39.

⁶ See Julia Roos, "Backlash against Prostitutes' Rights: Origins and Dynamics of Nazi Prostitution Policies," *Journal of the History of Sexuality* 11.1-2 (2002): 67-94.

⁷ Kurt Tucholsky, "Valeska Gert," *Die Weltbühne* 17.7 (1921): 204.

⁸ See Ramsay Burt, *Alien Bodies: Representations of Modernity, 'Race' and Nation in Early Modern Dance* (London: Routledge, 1998), esp. 51-53.

⁹ Suse Byk's film with several of Gert's dances remains to this day in the Museum of Modern Art, New York.

¹⁰ Valeska Gert, *Typoskript zu Valeska Gerts Tanzphilosophie*, undated and unpublished fragment, Akademie der Künste Berlin, Gert archive (hereafter abbreviated as BAK) 209.

¹¹ Max Weber, *The Protestant Ethic and the Spirit of Capitalism* [1904] (London: Unwin University Books, 1930), 182.

¹² Quoted in Fred Hildenbrandt, *Die Tänzerin Valeska Gert. Mit 27 ganzseitigen Bildern* (Stuttgart: Hädecke, 1928), 36.

¹³ Gert, *Typoskript zu Valeska Gerts Tanzphilosophie*, undated and unpublished fragment, BAK 209.

¹⁴ To my knowledge, only Burt interprets Gert's dances in relation to Americanism (*Alien Bodies*, 30-35).

¹⁵ Detlev Peukert, *Die Weimarer Republik. Krisenjahre der klassischen Moderne* (Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 1987), 179.

¹⁶ David Midgley, *Writing Weimar: Critical Realism in German Literature, 1918-1933* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000).

¹⁷ Indeed, Gert's style of movement induced Hildenbrandt to call her thus in *Die Tänzerin Valeska Gert*, 85.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, 29.

¹⁹ Rudolf Kayser, "Americanism," in *The Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, ed. Anton Kaes, Martin Jay, and Edward Dimendberg (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1994), 395.

²⁰ Fritz Wildung, "Sport Is the Will to Culture," in *Weimar Republic Sourcebook*, 681.

²¹ Hildenbrandt, *Die Tänzerin Valeska Gert*, 111-13.

²² See also Burt, *Alien Bodies*, 33.

²³ Quote taken from Francis Steegmuller, *Cocteau: A Biography* (London: Macmillan, 1970), 166.

²⁴ Elizabeth Hutton Turner, "La Jeune Fille Américaine and the Dadaist Impulse," in *Women in Dada: Essays on Sex, Gender, and Identity*, ed. N. Samuelson-Gorse (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), 17.

²⁵ Mysticism was a crucial feature in the works of some proponents of German expressive dance, such as Rudolf von Laban, its main theorist. His approach to dance was preoccupied with mythical elements and underpinned by a supernatural metaphysics; he actually believed that dance was a manifestation of a cosmic and mystic force.

²⁶ Gert, *Mein Weg*, 43.

²⁷ *Ibid.*, 26.

²⁸ See for instance Karl Jasper's philosophical treatise on *The Mental Situation of our Age* (1931) and Ernst Toller's play *The Machine Wreckers* (1922).

²⁹ See Midgley, *Writing Weimar*, 315.

³⁰ Referring to one of her earliest dance creations, Gert herself commented that she "portrayed for the first time something that was very characteristic of our time, namely instability" (*Ich bin eine Hexe*, 38).

³¹ Gert, *Typoskript zu Valeska Gerts Tanzphilosophie*, undated and unpublished fragment, BAK 209.

³² Sigmund Freud, *Das Unbehagen in der Kultur (Civilization and its Discontents)*, in *Studienausgabe*, vol. 9 (Frankfurt, 1982), 269.

³³ Gert, *Typoskript zu Valeska Gerts Tanzphilosophie*, undated and unpublished fragment, BAK 209.

³⁴ Alfred Richard Meyer, "Valeska Gert," in *Der große Munkepunke. Gesammelte Werke von A. R. Meyer* (Hamburg: Hoffmann und Campe, 1924), 115-17.

³⁵ The *Hexenküche (Witch's Kitchen)*, founded by Gert in 1950, was one of her venues in Berlin.

³⁶ Hanns Schulze, *Tänzerinnen. II. Valeska Gert* (Dresden, 1920), BAK 394.

³⁷ Gert, *Ich bin eine Hexe*, 38.

³⁸ Hildenbrandt, *Die Tänzerin Valeska Gert*, 78.

³⁹ *Ibid.*, 85.

⁴⁰ Mikhail Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, trans. Helene Iswolsky (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1968), 10.

⁴¹ See Hildenbrandt, *Die Tänzerin Valeska Gert*, 125-28, cf. 88.

⁴² Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 19.

⁴³ Although she was seen as far from beautiful, it is worth noting that some contemporaries, for instance Ivan Goll and Sergey Eisenstein, were sexually attracted to Gert and her dance; the latter once sending her a bouquet of red roses (see Gert 1968, *op.cit.*, p. 71). Similarly, the speaker in Meyer's poem suggests his erotic attraction to her.

⁴⁴ See Meyer, who refers ironically to her "hambone."

⁴⁵ Schulze, *Tänzerinnen. II. Valeska Gert*.

⁴⁶ See F. M. Peter, *Valeska Gert. Tänzerin, Schauspielerin, Kabarettistin. Eine dokumentarische Biographie* (1987).

⁴⁷ Bakhtin, *Rabelais and His World*, 26.

⁴⁸ In romantic and classical ballets, the mouth of the dancer is always closed.

⁴⁹ Hyberbole is a characteristic both of Gert's physicality and of her dance style. Hildenbrandt noted that "She is always inordinately exaggerated, inordinately exaggerated. . . . Her dances are also based on this exaggeration, one like the other, because she feels everything in an eccentric way and because she experiences everything eccentrically, she must dance eccentrically too. . . . She dances as in slow motion, she enlarges and coarsens, she drags it out, she makes a whole dance out of a minute impudent idea" (59; my translation). See also Susanne Foellmer's comment in "Verschobene Körper, groteske

Körper,” in *Tanz Theorie Text*, ed. G. Klein and Ch. Zipprich (Münster: Literaturverlag, 2002), esp. 461-65.

⁵⁰ Peter Stallybrass, “Patriarchal Territories: The Body Enclosed,” in *Rewriting the Renaissance: The Discourses of Sexual Difference in Early Modern Europe*, ed. M. W. Ferguson, M. Quilligan, and N. J. Vickers (Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press, 1986), 124.

⁵¹ L[eonie] D[otzler], undated, untitled, BAK 402.

⁵² Stefan Zweig complained that “even the Rome of Suetonius did not know such orgies as the Berlin tranvestite balls, where hundreds of men in women’s dresses and women in men’s clothes danced before the benevolent eyes of the police. With the decline of all values, a kind of lunacy seized the bourgeois circles in particular, which had hitherto been unshakeable in their structure.” Stefan Zweig, “Die Welt von Gestern. Erinnerungen eines Europäers,” in *Gesammelte Werke in Einzelbänden*, ed. K. Beck (Frankfurt: Fischer, 1982), 358f.

⁵³ An author named Alfred Holtmont, who wrote an entire book on the breeches-part and gender swapping, claimed that drag was a necessary stage on the woman’s path to emancipation, and that it was crucial to shed female clothing which he saw as a symbol of female subjugation. Alfred Holtmont, *Die Hosenrolle. Variationen über das Thema das Weib als Mann* (Munich: Meyer & Jessen, 1925), esp. 8 and 224.

⁵⁴ Burt, *Alien Bodies*, 34.

⁵⁵ Gert, who was Jewish and expressed anti-establishment ideas, herself experienced persecution, and had to emigrate during the Third Reich.