

## ***DAS WARTEN***

### **Mathilde Thiele, A life in Dance and War**

#### **Key Terms**

Mathilde Thiele

Dore Hoyer

Mary Wigman

Gret Palucca

Adolph Hitler

World War I

World War II

*Tanz für Käthe Kollwitz*

#### **Abstract:**

There are several stories that could be told about any of us. In this article, I strive to tell Frau Mathilde Thiele's stories of her dance experiences during perilous times of two world wars. She was my teacher in 1965-66 for my Fulbright study at the Mary Wigman School in Berlin. Much later we became friends in Western New York, where I listened to her life stories over a period of about twenty years, as she moved into her nineties. I value her narratives as oral history, and hope to add them to perspectives of dance in Germany during the growth of early modern

dance, particularly to contextualize the lives of dancers in their own times. Frau Thiele left me her paintings, books and photographs, and I feel responsible to make the most salient photographs and some of the paintings available as I do here. Of course there is a great deal of interpretation in oral history, and I hope the reader will engage the article in this light. The telling of history always involves selectivity and interpretation. History is story. Here I represent Thiele's stories of her life in dance and war as she told them to me.

Accordingly, in the Postscript, I present my perspective on a key figure of this time, Frau Mary Wigman, as I evaluate a late twentieth century ideological and feminist critique of Wigman's life and work. In this century, feminism has shifted toward feminisms in the plural. As I revise this article today, September 13, 2017, the *New York Times* reports in an article on German Chancellor Angela Merkel by Katrin Bennhold that Germany, despite its having the most powerful woman in the world in charge of its government, has not advanced the causes of women much, and Merkel, who grew up in East Germany, shuns the word "feminist." Neither would Wigman and Thiele have engaged feminism as it is represented in Europe and America today, and yet they lived lives of dangerous independence during difficult times as Hitler promoted traditional roles for women.

**DAS WARTEN**

*To be without dancing is to be uneducated.*

Mathilde Thiele

*To dance you must prepare your body so you can dance as you like,  
but first you must find your body.*

Mathilde Thiele

There is a dark expressionist lithograph called *Nie Wieder Krieg* (Never Again War) by German artist and activist Käthe Kollwitz who was an eloquent advocate for victims of social injustice, war and inhumanity in the early twentieth century. Her lithograph was completed in 1924, ten years after the beginning of World War I. Coinciding with the beginning of World War I in 1914, Mary Wigman, the most influential of the German expressionist choreographers, created her first *Witch Dance*. Her second and most famous *Witch Dance* (1926) came two years after Kollwitz's *Nie Wieder Krieg*. In four more years, Wigman's monumental statement on war and death, *Totenmal* (1930), preceded Hitler's rise to power (1933) and the beginning of World War II in 1939 with the invasion of Poland. That was the year I was born. Soon after the end of World War II in 1945, *Nie Wieder Krieg* became the theme for a noted student of Wigman's, Dore Hoyer. It was included in her full concert dance cycle, *Tanz für Käthe Kollwitz* (1946). Of Wigman's hundreds of students, she considered Hoyer her "only legitimate heir." This

was the first work for Hoyer's newly established dance group, working in the one room that was left of the former Wigman Studio in Dresden after the devastating bombing toward the end of World War II and the Russian occupation of East Germany and East Berlin. I saw Hoyer perform in West Berlin in 1965, the year I studied with Wigman and Mathilde Thiele. I visited East Berlin several times in the sleet and chill of that winter, waiting in long lines at a painful divide and check point to move through the Berlin wall. All of the above connections are at play in my writing here.

The pacifist-feminist aesthetic of Kollwitz was influential in the aesthetic concerns of early modern dancers in Germany, though never so apparent as in Hoyer's dance named after her. Expressionist dancer Mathilde (Til) Thiele was a central figure in *Tanz für Käthe Kollwitz*. She was thirty nine years old at that time, attesting Hoyer's interest to work with older dancers who could bring maturity to her work. The group members were close to each other in dance as in life because of shared experiences of war and privation.

I studied for a year with Wigman and Thiele in 1965-66 at the Wigman School in Berlin. At the dawning of a new century in 2000, Thiele lived only forty miles from me in her small house on lake Ontario, where the winter wind and snow blisters the skin, and we all wait for the first crocus of spring. She lived there alone. In April of 1997 she turned 90, and we celebrated her birthday in the Dance Department at State University of New York at Brockport where I was teaching.

I liked spending time with Thiele, and visited her often. Sometimes she told me she was ready to die. Her life had been full, now she waited for death, preparing through her Sufi practice. "I'm waiting for God to take me," she said, "I don't know whether its happiness or punishment to live so long." When I was with Thiele, I felt the perilous times she had lived through, and the light she generated. I also felt the peace of her impending passage. She told me the stories of her life in dance and war, the same ones over and over. I came to value them as oral history, and never tired of listening. I gleaned more with each telling. This is how I became acquainted with Hoyer's *Tanz für Käthe Kollwitz* and the circumstances surrounding it.

It isn't just the stories, but also the unfolding of Thiele's personality as part of the narrative that interests me, and the re-creation from her point of view of the "original stew," as she calls it, of modern dance. She remembers Rudolph von Laban as handsome, "a ladies man," and speaks passionately of teaching at the Wigman school for eighteen years. She shared Wigman's struggles to rebuild her work after World War II, as dancers escaped the rubble of Dresden and the predicament of Russian control to settle in the more liberated rubble of Berlin. Thiele always recounts her love/hate relationship with Gret Palucca with whom she danced for many years in Dresden, and she remembers Palucca's attempted suicides. Thiele talks most of her close relationship with Dore Hoyer, and the indelible horror of discovering Hoyer's body after her suicide. She always recounts the neatly arranged and labeled bundles that Hoyer left for her friends and sister dancers, and Hoyer's last letter to her (to Til, as her friends call her).

Thiele doesn't like much of what she sees in dance in 2000, be it modern, avant garde, or classical. Contemporary dance is just "watered down stew" in her opinion, lacking in the daring experiment that was part of the expressionist avant garde and rebelliousness of the early moderns. "Dance nowadays," she says, "is just movements—movements with no purpose or meaning—so why do them"? Dance for Thiele needs commitment; the movements should carve intentionally charged and symbolically delineated space. But dance movement should also "be abstracted," and not literal, she says, since dance draws "an essence" from life. Thiele believes that dance should call us to think and act with conscience. Dance is serious art for her, an existential act of self-definition.

When I watched Thiele teach in Canada toward the end of her teaching career in 1979, she was clearly pointing out the relationship of dance expression to personal expression, and working carefully with each student's potential according to movement/motivational problems both technical and dramatic. There was a blend of choreographic structure and improvisational freedom in her method, and significantly, no air of conformity. It brought me back to my study at the Wigman studio, to the dialectic between structure and freedom that resonated in the teaching methods of Wigman and Thiele, and I thought about their respect for each other in spite of their very real differences as teachers. I was also struck by their independence as women, and their ability to sustain friendly and fair argument. These were qualities not much in

evidence in the Berlin I experienced in 1965, even twenty years after the end of the war.<sup>1</sup>



Figure 1. Courtesy Mathilde Thiele

Thiele has some pictures from Hoyer's *Tanz für Käthe Kollwitz* that capture my feminist/existentialist eye. They illustrate the commitment of dancers in this time. The images of Thiele in this work capture her spirituality, her stormy search for personal truth in the truth of the dance. The first work of the cycle called "*Inspiration*," calls to mind the tenderness and care of Kollwitz. The moment shown in Figure 1 is very near the beginning, as Thiele is being awakened from a deep sleep and imbued with the spirit to take up "the fight," as she calls it. This fight is a call to action on behalf of the common people, the poor, and children. It is a woman's fight against oppressive regimes, motivated by the experience of women as they are involved in the daily care of others.

The dance is about struggle and pain. There are questions of power involved, women's traditional roles amidst their moral choices and responsibilities. The dance, like the art of Kollwitz, revolves around an ethics of care and the power of responsiveness. It is a restless statement, questioning political powers. Personal powers are at stake, yet there is no Nietzschean superhuman here. The world Kollwitz represents, and Hoyer projects in dance, is that seen through the eyes of an unsentimental mother—whose care extends to the suffering of the human family. As feminist, the dance does not have the individual rights of women to pursue personal goals at stake. The personal is not yet political. There is something larger than "the personal" at work, the mobilization of feminine conscience in the face of what we now call "human rights" is more important. In this sense the dance work is political; although I do not read it as narrowly



propagandistic. Rather its concerns are morally and spiritually compelled by questions of suffering: Why do we suffer? How can we end or go beyond suffering. How shall we live?



Figure 2. Photo by Lenka von Koerber, Courtesy Mathilde Thiele

In Figure 2, still from "*Inspiration*," we see Thiele being energized for her role as a leader. She will proclaim the truth of her conviction, and inspire the group to stand against wrong. This direct matter of symbolic form is one of the marks of expressionism, but its accomplishment is by no means this simple in the dance. In this article, we can only extrapolate photographic moments. In the dance, as in the art of Kollwitz, the subject matter becomes poignant in the manner of the whole, not relying on singular moments or content alone. For certainly there could be inept attempts to deal with the same content. Dance, being less abstract than visual art in its dependence on the physical presence of the dancer, may be in more danger of falling into the trap of simplistic literalism.

I did not see this dance. I have to imagine it from the pictures, Thiele's descriptions, her performance view of it, and my study of expressionism with Thiele and Wigman. Having seen Hoyer dance also aids my interpretation. Even if from a distance, I see Hoyer's clarity and purpose, and I gather the spiritual message of her dance for Kollwitz. I try to see it from its own time, not my own, for so much has passed inbetween. We dance for, write for, paint for, our own time. But I believe it is possible, nevertheless to be influenced by the art of the past. Indeed, art is one of our links to the past, and a form of understanding in itself.



Figure 3. Photo by Lenka von Koerber, courtesy Mathilde Thiele

Figure 3 shows Thiele with her arms upstretched and fingers curled. Her eyes are searching or beseeching, or perhaps about to see more than they have been accustomed to. There is an edge here, something is about to happen, and it won't be easy. Thiele says that to Hoyer, "*Inspiration*" represented the flight of thoughts before they are manifested in action. "*Inspiration*" is part of the first full section of the cycle named for Kollwitz's work AUS BAUENKRIEGE (War of the Farmers), based on the historic thirty years war (1843). The next two dances in this section are "*Losbruch*" (Breakaway) and "*Gesprach mit dem Tode*" (Conversation with death), a solo for Hoyer (not shown here).



Figure 4. Courtesy Mathilde Thiele



Figure 5. Photo by Madeline Winkler-Betzendahl, courtesy Mathilde Thiele

In Figure 4, which moves from "*Inspiration*" to the breakaway of "*Losbruch*," Thiele confronts the group, and we see various reactions. How will they become unified to act, how will they find courage? Figure 5, also from "*Losbruch*," now has the group knit more closely, leaning and reaching out as a whole, focussed and fearless, as the upraised fisted arm of the woman in the background communicates. This represents a "break," both literal and emotional. The angry mob prepares to surge forward, to fight

repression. This moment of the dance closely parallels Kollwitz,'s work also called "*Losbruch*."

The pictures of "*Losbruch*" express a choreographic unification of group action wherein each person, nevertheless, retains her individuality. Late twentieth century dance is also familiar with such group choreography as may be functionally whole and at the same time hold sculptural complexity. This marks the work of Bill T. Jones or Alvin Ailey, for instance. But it was the early modern dance that provided the first images for a non-balletic asymmetrical lifelike dance corps, based more on the sculptural/emotional shape of the whole than "dance steps" in tandem.



Figure 6. Courtesy Mathilde Thiele

“*Losbruch*” continues to develop as we see in Figure 6. Thiele is in front. The historical figure of “the black Anna” is placed in the foreground, since Anna goaded the farmers on in their rebellion. Hoyer used her choreography to show courage in the face of oppression. As Anna, Thiele is the one who gathers the people and inspires courage. In the photograph, the women are unified through bodily contact, forward momentum and an outward and slightly upward focus. Earnestly and soberly, they are



drawn forward. The costumes of this dance are not concerned with pretty femininity, as was the habit in ballet with its history of courtly manners and aristocratic society. Rather, we see that the dress is plain and realistically common. Hoyer's work shows the radical break of German expressionist dance from the entrenched mores of ballet in Europe. The peasant and almost pedestrian nature of the "*Losbruch*" costumes reminds me of this. Thiele does not remember that the dance took up any particular social cause, but that it was more generally about mustering strength to confront power and its misuses. She sees it as a woman's protest against war, an interpretation giving flesh to the art and concerns of Kollwitz.

There are three major sections forming the central portion of the cycle not pictured here. STILLE (Stillness), danced by Thiele and Trude Heinzl, is first in this section of the cycle. Next comes CARMAGNOLE (Dance around the Guillotine) another historical reference to repression that is danced by the whole group. This is based on a popular song which accompanied the profound changes of the French revolution. It peaks for Hoyer in wild dances around the guillotine. MUTTER (Mother) follows this and includes two dances: "*Im Kriege*" (In War) danced by the group, and "*Im Gluck*" (In Happiness), danced by Hoyer and Ursula Kosinski.



Figure 7. Courtesy Mathile Thiele

Figure 7 distills gestural dancing in the beginning of the last third of the cycle called *DAS WARTEN* (The Waiting). This dance is based on the Kollwitz lithograph *Das Warten*, 1914. Here Thiele stands with eyes closed as though waiting for some message or inner song to awaken her sight and breath. One can't help but notice how this aspect of waiting relates to the very beginning of the cycle in Figure 1. But here the

waiting is less passive. Thiele is waiting for something. To confuse hope with waiting here would be to miss the point. Hope might turn to asking then, or need. There is a serene composure in Thiele, a meditative waiting in trust of an answer that will cannot summon and only preparation can bring. The spreading fingers of the right hand do not beseech. They are feeling the evenness of their separate powers as the arm is supported and the elbow rests in the other hand. This is a centering stance; it travels within while the hand balances and listens. Dancer Ellen von Frankenberg, in contrast, waits in boredom with her chin resting in her hands; while Jutta Lucchesi sits in a worried frame of mind. Each person waits alone as all wait together.

The individuality of the dancers in *DAS WARTEN* interests me most. Each one has found her own statement in the context of the whole, and Thiele's is fascinating. The above description only begins to read Thiele's mystical composure, as she waits without desire or frustration, much as she waited patiently well into her nineties, still in the dance. It is apparent that the dancers participated in Hoyer's choreography. This is obvious from the pictures, but we also know that this was part of Hoyer's process as her dance moved progressively from improvisation to choreography. We could therefore expect much of the dancers' personalities and character traits to enter into the dance work. Group choreography in the early modern period often arose improvisationally within a design. Likewise, Hoyer would shape the dancers' improvisations on themes she gave them, according to the schematic structure of the whole, as Pina Bausch would also later do, but with a more absurdist result.

Since Thiele figures so prominently in *Tanz für Käthe Kollwitz*, the dance presents an interesting character sketch of her person. Thiele's dancer personae evolved through her self discoveries in relation to the other dancers. The themes of Kollwitz as seen through Hoyer's lens, provided the context. This process-oriented dance relates to the postmodern as it repudiated established techniques. But the early modern emphasis on emotional content and intuitive development of narrative, plot, or theme rendered it more innocently gestural, and direct.

*SIGNALE* follows *DAS WARTEN*. Wiga Schade, Kosinski and the group perform this work. Hoyer performed in *SIGNALE*, showing her lean intensity and the striking clarity of her personal voice. Thiele says it also demonstrated Hoyer's powers of abstraction, despite her gestural and direct style. The dance communicates the angularity and strength of *SIGNALE*, as a harbinger of transformation. It points toward or signals a direction and clears a path toward freedom.

The dance comes full cycle in this realization. Photograph eight below shows its conclusion with *WEG IN DIE FREIHEIT* (The Way of Freedom), danced by the group. The gestures of this dance are varied and full-bodied. We see that freedom has many shapes, that the body is freedom's vehicle. It can reach, fully extending the arms upward as we see in the center. Or by contrast, as in Thiele's gesture from a half kneeling position, freedom can spread open its arms to clear a space with grateful upturned palms. In freedom, the arms say, there is also thanksgiving.



Figure 8. Photo by Siegfried Enkelmann, courtesy Mathilde Thiele

When Thiele lived in America, "the land of the free," she sometimes asked me what I thought of my country. Did I think it "evil"? She spoke of a double standard at the heart of America, that the rhetoric of freedom was far from the situational truth. There are unthinkable privations and suffering in this rich country, and our role in war becomes ever more complex since the mire of Viet Nam—with America's questionable

role and methods there. When I spoke with Thiele in 2003, America was involved in what our government called "Operation Iraqi Liberation." "Freedom," Thiele says, "is not a proclamation; it is a way of life, and a feeling in your heart." Thiele finds freedom in nature she says, being with animals, watching the changing seasons, sometimes contemplating the ice flows on lake Ontario as a moonscape. Into her nineties she walked every day, even in winter, and said that the night air was best for gathering strength.

### **Her Story**

Frau Til Thiele was born Mithilde Nelles in 1907 in Bonn and married sculptor Herbert Thiele in her late twenties. She lived through two world wars. When I asked her in her mid-nineties how her life had been shaped by war, she had no trouble answering:

*Of course, war changed me, but I had no choice, I had to take what came. I had to go through it. It was not in my hands. Today, I am waiting. I know one day I will go back to God. I am impatient, and have nothing to hold me here. I want to go. But meanwhile, I'm still here.*

Thiele's small house on the lake was full of her artworks. She had studied painting, and grew up with its influence, living for several years as a child in the home of painter August Macke, a leader of *Der Blaue Reiter* (The Blue Rider) expressionist

movement, and later working with artists at the Bauhaus who painted her in motion. She worked closely with Paul Klee, and stayed often at his place in Bern. When she opened her trunk, I was amazed at some of the treasures tucked in here and there, among them originals by Klee. Since settling on Lake Ontario, Thiele spent evening hours for many years on her paintings, stitched wall hangings, and intricately designed hand woven wool rugs. Her house was warmed by the beauty of these works. She left many of them to me. Her paintings are bold and elegant with a lot of color. Many are landscapes or seascapes. The rugs are calming: beige, grey, and white. When I visited her, they felt good on my bare feet. We sat on the rugs, dancer style, and talked, or we lay down in their comfort to exchange hands-on movement therapies. Sometimes we danced, as she guided me through some new somatically inclined body stretches she had devised.

Thiele's childhood was strongly influenced by the August Macke home. She was the eleventh of twelve children and lived just across the street from the Mackes who had two sons near her age, Walter and Wolfgang. Thiele says that she and Walter became so close that her parents decided to let her live with the Mackes, since she and Walter would become ill when they were separated. The Mackes were nonconformists. Their house was frequented by artists of all kinds. Thiele remembers Franz Marc coming to stay when he and his family were still living in a hay loft. At the Mackes, nudity was common for children and parents alike. When she was pregnant, Frau Elizabeth Macke would encourage the children to listen to the unborn baby's voice with their ears pasted

to her swollen belly. Thiele said the children then tried this with other women who thought they were crazy. Their openness concerning nudity didn't play well at school either.

Walter Macke, a promising artist himself, died at eighteen. Thiele, who had left by then, never learned the exact causes of his death. August Macke died in WWI in 1914. Elizabeth Macke, Thiele's second mother, formed a new family in Berlin with the writer Lothar Erdmann who had been a close friend of Elizabeth and August. Erdmann eventually died of a heart attack through his difficulties with the Nazis. Elizabeth recounts her life and these times in her book, *Erinnerung an August Make* (1962). After Thiele made her home in America in her seventies, she visited Elizabeth on several trips to Berlin. She seemed happy and pleasant in her single room in an old folks home where her children had placed her in Berlin. Elizabeth was surrounded by Macke's paintings, but very much alone at the time of her death.

As one of the last living embers of the original German expressionist dance, Thiele lived the final years of her life in Western New York, and had no desire to return to Germany again. Her colleagues, friends and family were all gone. The last time Thiele visited Germany was to see her friend, the great dancer Palucca, just before her death. The Berlin wall had not yet come down, but Palucca got permission to spend a day in West Berlin with Thiele.

Eventually, Thiele's life formed around her New York Sufi community and its rituals, including occasional fasting. In her 88th year she made the pilgrimage to Mecca



in Saudi Arabia on the advice of her teacher and Shake, and performed the several miles of ritual walking around the Caba with throngs of worshipers. She said she would go once more.

Thiele survived the bombing of Dresden. It is one of her most impassioned stories. She and her husband Herbert Thiele lived in a house in the park. He had won first prize for sculpture from the city of Dresden, and was given the choice of money or the privilege of living in a beautiful house in the park with space for a studio. Thiele was living there alone at the time of the bombing, since Herbert had been sent as a soldier to the Russian front, and he never returned. She remembers teaching children in a nearby school when they heard the enemy bombers coming. She took the children into the shelter then ran toward her home in the park with her dog, since dogs were not allowed in the cellar shelter. She had barely gotten into the park when the bombs began dropping, so many she said, "I thought the sky was on fire." Thiele threw off all of her clothes, so as not to catch fire from them, and lay nude in the grass with her dog. The heat was so intense it killed her dog, partially melting his coat. She was burned, bloody and shocked, but still alive and hiding in the grass when it was over. A German soldier who found her gave her his coat and five coffee beans to bring her out of shock. Then he led her to others who were going immediately to Czechoslovakia, and they journeyed into the mountains for safety. She remembers being bloody and cold on the way. It was winter, and she was afraid of dying.

They had to lie down in the icy mud many times as the English and Americans continued the bombing and gunfire. Thiele was missing her dog. Later she found out that the shelter where she left the children had been decimated, all had died, and all of the houses in the park had also been destroyed. Of this she says, "My dog saved my life." Or perhaps she saved herself by taking care of him? She believes: "It's astonishing how you can survive so many things you think might kill you."

In Czechoslovakia they came upon a house with a white flag and found asylum. Thiele and others were given one towel and a robe. These became "my entire life possessions," says Thiele, "I needed nothing more." She felt sorry for those carrying heavy loads they were trying to save. In this new place, Thiele met a former student of hers from England, with whom she stayed with for a while. After a time, she and others thought it would be safe to return to Dresden. The women, fearing rape from the Russians, blackened their faces to hide and look old. It was there after her return to the ruins of Dresden that Thiele met Dore Hoyer one day in the street. They were amazed and happy to see each other alive.

They began to dance in what was left of the former Wigman School in Dresden, one bare room with no windows. They got permission from the Russians to work there, since it was understood that they were dancers/artists, and they could obtain papers to verify this. Thiele stressed that these papers were very important, since artists were respected, and less likely to be mistreated as society rebuilt itself. Thiele remembers the Russian soldiers who entered Dresden as the poorest and most backward of Russians:

"They had never seen toilets, and thought they were for drinking water." Women survivors had to be constantly hiding and very cunning to escape rape. "The soldiers would just push their rifles through the windows, kick down the doors, shout 'du Frau,' and rape women on the spot." She felt lucky to have her artist papers. They also protected her from being taken as an unpaid housemaid "to clean up garbage" for the Russians.

As Germany began to split into sections, it became clear that it would not be easy for people to escape from Russian occupation of East Germany. Thiele began to feel like a prisoner there, so she collaborated with others including another dancer to leave Dresden. They prepared by talking to people in the villages near the border to understand the Russian habits of patrol. When they had determined the right time to leave, they ran through fields, and forded a river while the Russians slept. They continued to travel mainly by foot, and found conveyances wherever they could, slipping aboard trains through windows, and finding horse driven wagons. It was not easy knowing who to trust, she says. "Many would take your money, then turn you into the authorities for more money."

Finally, Thiele reached her parents home in Bonn—and freedom. But she was soon disillusioned with her parents' life and attitude after the war. "They ate white bread while others were starving," she said. "I stank like a fish from my ordeals; my parents said I shouldn't be in good company or go out into the street." So Thiele had only stayed three days with her parents when she decided her life should be back in Dresden with

the privations and the rebuilding, despite the Russian occupation with its cruel elements. Thus she began the long and dangerous return, always inquiring in the villages the best back road routes. "I got oriented this way, daily."

Back in Dresden, Thiele and Hoyer opened the former Wigman School, while Wigman had gone to stay with her sister in Leipzig, seeking to remake her own life in the aftermath of the war. Thiele remembers that they advertised the school on the stump of an old tree just outside the studio. Of course they were careful to establish their credentials with the Russians, in order to get their artists' papers which provided some recognition for their work and lifted their hopes for personal safety.

Slowly students came to the school. Hoyer and Thiele received support from the government of Dresden to help rebuild cultural life. Thiele describes those times:

*There we did the first work with the Käthe Kollwitz dance. Eventually we did it for audiences on tour. It was so difficult traveling in those days. The trains were full. Sometimes we would get in through the windows, and sit with our knees under our chins. We had very little to eat, often nothing. And we worked so hard to keep things together.*

*Dore's knee got bad, so she couldn't dance in the work. I remember giving the dancers two days of holidays once, and Dore became upset with me. Dancing was everything to her. She had come from a poor family, and often lived in the streets as a child. Working with Dore was frustrating; often she would tire*

*of teaching and just not show up, leaving me a note that I should take over. She also became emotionally involved with students at the school, and this bothered me, but we always remained friends.*

Eventually Thiele's path would lead her to Wigman. This was after Wigman's work rebuilt, and the city of Berlin gave her a house for her living quarters and the relocation of her school. Wigman asked Thiele if she would like to work with her, and said she could also live at the school. So Thiele began her teaching with Wigman:

*Mary (Wigman) lived downstairs. I lived above her in my small room at the school. She would signal me by hitting the ceiling with a broomstick, and I would reply by banging on the floor. She would signal me when she had a package from a friend from America— that meant food. She had many, many friends throughout the world. Students had warm feelings for her. She was not a domineering teacher. As we started the school, there were so many people crowded in the tiny cold studio that we could barely move. It stank with the feet of so many dancers. We really didn't need any heat. We didn't even have enough money to buy cigarettes. Sometimes Mary and I would gather butts from the street, and smoke them. This kept away the hunger.*

Thiele also danced with and taught for Palucca, "but that was very early at the beginning of my dance career." She remembers the events leading up to this:

*I left home when I was 16 years old with just five Deutch Marks in my pocket. My dream was to dance, but my only experience was with French mime. On school holidays I had gone to Paris to study with Etienne Decroux, sleeping in the streets because I could not afford a room, and living on marzipan. When I struck out from home to dance, I went to Ruth Loser in Dusseldorf first. She was head of the modern dance wing of the opera. Loser gave me food and was generous. When I told her I wanted to dance, she said, "let me see your battement." I had to tell her I didn't know what she was talking about, not knowing the ballet language. So she called for an accompanist and asked me to improvise some character studies. She must have thought I had potential. There I took my first dance studies, and stayed for a year.*

Ruth Loser gave Thiele the possibility to go to Dresden to study with Palucca. On the way, she remembers staying in a village where she was nearly eaten up by bed bugs, and she refused to pay the rent. On arriving at Palucca's school, she was still swollen. Thiele recounts her first experiences at the school this way:

*On first sight of Palucca, I disliked her intensely, so I avoided her class. Finally, one student convinced me to come to the class. That day Palucca said we should not speak in the dance class, and only use movement gestures. I took her literally: when she asked me a question and expected an answer, I did not speak, but only gestured. She kicked me out of class! So for another year I didn't take Palucca's class, but studied with other teachers in the school. Then I got a letter from Palucca saying that if I didn't come to the class, I couldn't pass the examination. Again my friends told me not to be stupid and stubborn, but to go to the class.*

*One day Palucca asked to see me. So I visited her. Even though I was hungry (I was eating only potatoes that I stole from a field), I refused her food. She asked me to go on tour.*

*I was perplexed, and said, 'no, you know we dislike each other.'*

*She said, 'come with me, if we have trouble, we will shake each other by the hair of the head, then we will get on with the work and forget it.'*

*I said, 'I must think about this three days.' It bothered me that every one obeyed Palucca. They almost prayed to her and never offered truthful*

*criticism. I was often in trouble with her, because I said what I was thinking.*

Eventually Palucca and Thiele got along in the rehearsals and on tours. They became friends. When Palucca was summoned to dance for Hitler at the 1936 Olympics, Thiele also went as rehearsal director. She remembers rehearsing Palucca's solo, "a waltz," for the dance "Maidenly Grace" in the Olympic arena with Palucca watching from high up in stadium to judge the effect. Palucca was to dance in a red dress as the central figure in the middle of concentric circles of teenage girls (about twenty-three hundred) who would give focus and visual texture to her solo. "It was so difficult dancing in the grass," Thiele says, "every step had to be a jump. The solo had to be very big to communicate in that huge space."

Palucca was called to have dinner with Hitler after the performance. Thiele remembers waiting in the dressing room just enjoying a cigarette and grateful that the event was over when she herself was called to the table with Hitler and Palucca. "I dared not refuse, though I hated social affairs," says Thiele. "I found out it was Palucca's idea." She had requested Thiele's company. "Then Palucca kept kicking me under the table," Thiele said, "afraid I would say the wrong thing." Thiele's strongest memory of the event concerned Palucca's dilemma:



*Hitler was a dangerous tyrant, and Palucca was Jewish. Had he known, he would have had her killed. Can you just imagine Hitler honoring a Jew at the Olympiad? At dinner he talked endlessly about his successes. After dinner, Palucca and I were so relieved we drank a whole bottle of wine in our room. We considered that Herr Goering might help Palucca escape if needed. We had word that he had helped artists (even Jews) through an underground operation, despite his close relationship to Hitler.<sup>2</sup>*

I have heard this story about Hitler many times, and it never changes. In fact Thiele's stories have remained consistent over the years. She does not remember exact dates. Sometimes there is a bit of time warp in the sequence, but the events remain intact. Her stories do not embellish on retelling, as is often the case when people look back on their lives, or become the heroes of their histories. With Thiele what emerges is not so much the hero as the survivor, the level-headed spartan who learned to live with meager means and integrity amidst the ambitions of powerful people. Thiele was often in the background as friend to Palucca, Wigman and Hoyer. She danced in works of these choreographers, and taught in the schools that each of these artists established in their own names. She remembers living mostly on cigarettes and sugar, even suffering a heart attack from malnutrition. At her 90th birthday party with my students, Thiele mentioned this, so someone asked her "do you still smoke"? Without pause, she answered facetiously, "No, Just Cigars!"

Thiele takes pride in straight talk, and never minces words. Dancing comes first. It was and still is (for her) synonymous with education. That is, to be without dancing is to be uneducated. Her life has been suffused with esthetic values. Art and life are one for Thiele. She knows what she likes, but is not elitist. She can quickly reduce things (paintings, dances, people, politics) to their simplest elements. I will not forget one incident about my second week at the Wigman School. We were dancing in a circle formation in Thiele's technique class, and I was thinking "well this is a bit simplistic," not what I was used to. Thiele stopped the class and said, "Sondra, you think you're too good for us." I was mortified. She continued, "don't think that because you come here with your American techniques that you have nothing to learn." I always respected her after that. She had read my mind, embarrassed me and "shaped me up" on the spot. Apparently I had a lot to learn.

Sometimes I ask Thiele what her feelings are about the Nazi rise to power in its effect on dance and dancers, since I am aware of relatively recent accounts that link Wigman and Laban to Fascism, and of the ambiguities in these accounts. Thiele knows about recent interpretations of Wigman's *Totenmal* as protofascist, even though it was perceived as pacifist by audiences in its own time and by the performers themselves, including Thiele. There is still an open question as to whether this dance stirred war or anti-war sentiment as Hitler was rising to power. Another question is whether Wigman might have provided a double message, surviving within the rising power structure, but with an aesthetic resistance not easy to read.

Wigman is judged as having been friendly to the Nazi cause in this phase of her career, even benefitting from it, and related to this is the question of whether she had a Nazi lover. Thiele is baffled by such accounts, and believes they ignore Wigman's aesthetic intentions and the basic thrust of her life, including the fact that Hitler closed her school, or at least Gobbels made it impossible for her to continue, as issues of aesthetic and political correctness heated up:

*We were dancers and artists making work that was radically new. Because of Wigman's early struggles, our work became recognized and accepted. Wigman was not popular when she began, because she did not entertain. Her work came directly from human responsiveness, deep personality and spirit. People thought she was crazy in the beginning of her career and threw tomatoes at her, but she persevered, and so a whole new form of dance grew and was eventually accepted. Wigman's whole life was struggle. Her themes were about life and death, and about human emotions.*

Wigman also explored relationships of the individual to the group, as did Doris Humphrey, and was often the solo figure with group support or tension, like Martha Graham. Thiele said Wigman was accused by Hitler of having "Jewish Gestures," and struggled to keep her school going. Thiele knew Wigman as well as anyone. She danced with Wigman in Dresden before the war; and after the war, and she taught at

the Wigman School in Berlin as its principle teacher (aside from Wigman herself) for eighteen years, the entire time of its existence. Still even Thiele is unclear about Wigman's so called Nazi lover:

*There was a banker who helped fund some concerts. Mary seemed to care a great deal for him. I think he was for Hitler, and had party ties. He left Mary; she was not for the fascist cause. Eventually he married one of her students, and it broke Mary's heart. In any case, would having a Nazi lover make someone a Nazi? Mary Wigman was her own person—strong and intelligent. She was democratically minded.*

*Mary never insisted that people think or dance her way. She found creativity more interesting than conformity. When students would copy her, she would say 'That is how I dance, what is your dance'? And she was a kind person. She corresponded with former students around the world. Mary never neglected people. I appreciated her wisdom more than once.*

Thiele explains the latter:

*There was a young man who came to study at the school in Berlin after the war. He was critical, very obstinate and unpleasant. I told Wigman to 'Kick him out.'*

*But she told me to just let him be. 'In ten years, she said, 'He'll write us love letters.'*

*And that's exactly what happened. When he became well known as a choreographer, he credited Wigman publicly.*

Thiele describes her life in dance in terms of the war, before and after, then later in her choice to teach for Palucca or Wigman:

*When I left Dresden, I had the chance to teach for Palucca in East Berlin or Wigman in West Berlin, as we were all going our own ways.*

*I asked Palucca, 'If I teach for you, what will I teach'? She said, 'You will teach Palucca, you will teach my style.'*

*I asked Wigman what I would teach in her school? She said, 'You will teach what you know from your own work.'*

*Of course, I went with Wigman, and never regretted it. Wigman had a strong personality, but she was never a tyrant.*

The communists built a big school for Palucca in East Berlin. Wigman could have also gone with the communists. As things settled down, Wigman was given an old home, with a small room that used to be the dining room for her studio, and an even smaller room upstairs for rehearsals. This school, barely distinguishable from houses around it, became a haven for creative freedom, with students coming to study from around the world.

When I was studying at the school in 1965, I remember that Thiele lived in a tiny room over the dining room studio, and preferred sleeping on the floor. As ever, her living circumstances were modest. She was the primary teacher of technique, gymnastic (somatic warm-up classes), and mime through her study with Decroux. She was also the school administrator, and often pored over the books with Wigman. Wigman taught technique, composition, and improvisation. Ulrich Kessler taught music and percussion classes.

Thiele's memory of Wigman's resourcefulness and warmth, bring back my own impressions. I remember Wigman as a dramatic teacher, using examples from classical and contemporary texts and music. I learned a lot about constructive criticism from her teaching style. She could be commanding in her dramatic flair, but this was always laced with humor. She sometimes called her students "mein kinder" (my children). Not having been a mother, she poured her maternal qualities more generally into her teaching and her art. But it was never the domestic maternal that I was aware of in her, more the generative. We explored the power of woman through the literary heroines of

Shakespeare, Homer, and von Kleist. Wigman emphasized self awareness in thematic character development. Often there were tragic and cathartic elements.

I liked to probe Thiele's memory of Fascism. She frequently talked of her fear during the Nazi era, and an incident that sticks out in memory. It was when she was living in the park in Dresden after the German occupation of France. Hitler had imported young French boys to dig a trench along a wall behind the park. Thiele often watched them at work. She found a way to remove a stone to create a small hole in the wall, and would sometimes leave potatoes for them. They reciprocated by leaving her cigarettes. Thiele and the boys never spoke, but would acknowledge each other silently through the eyes when they passed along the wall. Thiele had to be careful, because there were often SS soldiers nearby. One day a soldier came through the park directly toward her as she was passing the boys along the wall. When she saw him she thought: "This is it, now I'm finished." This was a time, Thiele says, "when children would turn in their own fathers as Jews or enemy sympathizers for rewards of money."

*The SS officer was carrying a pail, and said, "I'd like some water."*

*"Whew," Thiele says when she remembers her relief, "A stone dropped from my heart."*

While Thiele talks much about her life during the war, and I question her about it, she still talks about what is important in dancing. When I ask her what dance has given

her. She says that it has given her "an interesting life, and a young body at an old age."  
But she talks less of dance nowadays, and more of fate:

*Life has some sense, but what it is, I do not know. Finally it is in the hands of  
God.*



Frau Mathilde Thiele and Sondra Fraleigh on the occasion of Til's 90<sup>th</sup> birthday.  
Department of Dance, Brockport New York, State University of New York.





Mathilde Thiele, Sondra Fraleigh and students at a celebration of Til's 90<sup>th</sup> birthday, Department of Dance, State University of New York, College at Brockport.

#### POSTSCRIPT

Susan Manning examines Wigman's dance, *Totenmal* (1930) in her book, *Ecstasy and the Demon: Feminism and Nationalism in the Dances of Mary Wigman* (1993). While evidence that she uncovers suggests that most contemporary spectators considered *Totenmal* a pacifist statement, including the reviewer for the *Volkischer Beobachter*,

organ of the Nazi party, Manning interprets *Totenmal* as "protofascist" and "covert support for militarism" (pp. 148-160). It is significant to me that Manning's broad deconstructive interpretation which aims to find hidden meanings chooses to override the anti-war script that accompanied the dance including letters written by soldiers of World War I from Germany, France, and England. Manning believes that Wigman introduced the "male gaze" into her work through *Totenmal*, since in this work women and men are presented in their "traditional roles," as though all presentations of women and men as they have occupied traditional roles historically would introduce a "male gaze."

This visual concept as it developed in the film criticism of Laura Mulvey does not pretend to take account of traditional female roles in society in their full array. It indicates the specific objectifying gaze that fastens women as passive sexual objects in cinema.<sup>3</sup> Tradition and femaleness in dance cannot be explained through the tired formula of "the male gaze." Manning stretches it beyond capacity as she transposes it from cinema to dance and from contemporary feminist theory to a much earlier period in history. Manning sees historical paradoxes that abound in how Wigman as a prominent artist coped with fascism and cultural images of Germanness, including that of the romantic ballerina. Manning writes about the solos from the twenties that Wigman's dancing "... did and did not essentialize national identity, did and did not essentialize female identity" (p.45). The intrusion of the concept of "the male gaze" to theorize identity further blurs the text. Manning believes that Wigman's later strategies of

autobiography, archetype and musical visualization represent a shift in her work under the Third Reich to accommodate fascist aesthetics, a shift "... which required an identification with the Volk and a clear distinction between 'masculinity' and 'femininity'." This shift according to Manning had an ambivalent effect: "staging both an accommodation with and a limited resistance to fascist aesthetics" (p. 45). The enchainment beneath equivocation here is sweeping. Manning links choreographic strategies to fascist aesthetics, and she also links distinctions between masculinity and femininity to fascism, as though these distinctions could be generalized. One senses most of all Manning's struggle to come to terms with aesthetic context and change through poststructural theory and ideological critique. Her book is as much about her own thought processes as it is about Wigman. As Manning funnels Wigman and her career through contemporary ideological concepts of nationalism as "an imagined community" and a feminism committed to "the male gaze," she misses historical points that war imposed. In this era, there were more clear distinctions between the genders than there are now: men went to war; women waited and mourned, and not just in Germany. The question of individual complicity in fascism, so important to Manning's text, is not necessarily a gender question, it is a question of behavior and political alliance, a question of accountability and conscience. Considering the large stake in calling someone a Nazi, we should not get this history wrong. Manning's leap from aesthetic issues to fascist "collaboration" is a big one. The domestic realm, that

traditional place of the female, is also more complex than it appears in feminist critiques that depend on "the male gaze."

Consider the pacifist, "pro-active feminist gaze" of Kate Kollwitz, and her influence on choreographers of this era. Kollwitz's art sought a control for women—through protest. Her protest moved through the domestic realm which is also a place of power, and need not mean subservience. Kollwitz showed women as mothers and protectors, as well as revolutionaries. Would her works also introduce a "male gaze"? Doesn't this term reduce and oversimplify human relations historically if not also in the present?

The year I studied with Wigman, she gave us the assignment of choreographing solos on themes of famous female characters in literature. I remember three: Electra, Ophelia, and Pentisilia. Out of initial solo explorations some group dances evolved. I was given the assignment of creating Pentisilia's Amazon warrior tribe. I was in my early twenties then, reading Henrich von Kleist's book on this Amazon queen, and I did my best to capture her militant independence. I remember sticking yellow tape on dancer faces to represent golden war paint. Here was the thematic of war again, and this was twenty years after the end of World War II. But the image grew from literature, not Wigman's preoccupation with war, or premonitions of war to come. Here was the warrior archetype as woman, in a battle to find her own voice.

Another choreographic problem that Wigman gave us revolved around French composer Honnégar's music, *King David*. It involved a witch, that favorite archetype of

Wigman's, still going strong. We danced around a brew that held mystery and power, and I remember the awesome feeling.

Students also performed typically feminine dances that were soft in nature, like Susanne Linke's solo for Wigman's 79th birthday that was about sensitivity in hearing. I captured it on film along with segments from my abstract dance on contrasts and congruities, also including a duet on water and earth made by Americans Betsy Sacks and Powell Shepard. The film, "A Day at the Wigman School," is now in the New York City Library Dance Collection. One work we did in Wigman's composition class had postmodern qualities. Several of us, German, American and Indonesian, wore grey (anything grey you could find in your closet or someone else's) and passed oranges from person to person. We let the dance emerge improvisationally and playfully. Wigman's aesthetic taste varied widely, as demonstrated in her appreciation of our differing responses to the choreographic problems she gave us. Her favorite performance of dance companies visiting Berlin during 1965-66 season was the Alvin Ailey American Dance Theater. Ailey company members came to the Wigman school the day after their concert, and we had a party for them warmly hosted by Wigman.

At the time, I was applying for a job at a prominent women's college in America, and since I was in Germany, the college arranged for me to be interviewed by one of their former graduates, a German living in Berlin. She asked me if I had seen the Ailey performance and what I thought. I told her I did see it and really liked their work, to which she replied, "I don't know how you can stand all those black sweaty bodies." I

didn't take the job, happily so. I tell this story to illustrate the prejudice I observed in segments of German society at the time, this juxtaposed with the progressive atmosphere at the Wigman studio. I visited Berlin again in 2003, noticing how it had transformed after the wall came down. The now unified city was completely cosmopolitan, especially East Berlin.

Improvisational problems set by Wigman were spontaneously devised and always interested me the most: "work with the hands, improvise with turns, ride a bicycle, surprise me (this became the grey dance with oranges), move in a fast and complicated way, dance in circles or in two dimensions only, bring about a subtle contrast, move as though you were blind or deaf." Sometimes music or a simple mood of sadness would set the stage for exploration with no other motivation. We did beautiful dances and ugly ones, soft lyrical ones and androgynes, comedies, narratives and abstracts. Wigman could ride with them all, and had comments for improvement and insightful interpretations.

Hanya Holm, an early student of Wigman's who had established her work in America influenced me to go to Germany and study with Wigman. What I appreciated most about both of these teachers was their philosophical, analytical approaches. At the Wigman school, movement analysis and philosophy supported the study of dance, and critical response was cultivated in an atmosphere of good will.

In summary, historiography in dance might well be supported and problematized through perspectives and aesthetic intentions of performers and close attention to their

lives over time. Interpretations of dances and dancers at an historical remove are inevitably subjective, insufficient and at worst misleading, and ideological constructions of aesthetics are not impartial. Without this admission, they lack historical veracity.

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END NOTES

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<sup>1</sup> The two older women who were the matrons of my boarding house in Berlin in 1965 were unable to sustain discussion on any topic. There was just one point of view—theirs. Their husbands had both died in World War II and had been decorated with the Nazi Iron Cross. They wanted to take me around Berlin to see monuments to Hitler (or what they perceived as such), and talked about Hitler's mistake in making war on Russia -- his only mistake according to them. They lamented what had happened to the Jews, but when things went wrong, it was still the fault of some Jew. This view was constantly imparted to their sons.

<sup>2</sup> I have discussed with German scholars that Goering might not have needed an underground to help artists. Hitler and Goering were old drinking buddies. Goering was with Hitler throughout his rise to power, and it is entirely plausible that he (like Hitler) could "pardon" Jewishness, and help whomever he wished.

<sup>3</sup> Mulvey, Laura. 1975. 'Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema'. *Screen* 16 (3): 6–18.