**"We are the ones who…"**
**Festkultur as a blueprint for Oppositional Social Movements**

**By Hilary Bryan, © 2009**

"I do not like it. That is because it is dressed up in our clothes
and has nothing whatsoever to do with us."

Josef Goebbels wrote this indictment of Rudolf Laban's work the day he stormed out of Laban's monumental movement choir performance *Vom Tauwind und der Neuen Freude (Of the Spring Wind and the new Joy)*.(Preston-Dunlop) The Nazis had commissioned the work as part of the 1936 pre-Olympic dance festival inaugurating the massive Dietrich-Eckart open-air theater on the Olympic complex. The piece involved 1000 performers with multiple orchestras and was created simultaneously in over 30 cities. And on the eve of its premiere Goebbels stormed demonstratively out of this final dress rehearsal for 20,000 invited guests and cancelled the entire week of performances intended to open the Olympic Games. Laban's books were burned, his extensive network of schools was closed, and three decades of graduates from Laban Schools were forbidden to teach his work. Critical analysis of both this specific *Bewegungschor* (movement choir) and of the very ethos of the *Bewegungschor* movement explain its contradiction of monologic Nazi values with their uncompromisingly unambiguous ideology. The work's embedded dialogism and its nature as "open work" in the style of Umberto Eco sealed its censure. Rudolf Laban and his collaborators developed the group movement form *Bewegungschor* (movement choir) from a social agenda of open work and dialogism that wove together various threads current in restive pre and post WWI Europe, and which still hold currency today. I see in this early 20th century counterculture movement direct answers to questions being posed today by social activists. This paper responds to the call Stephen Duncombe articulates in *Dream: Re-imagining progressive Politics in an age of Fantasy* and which Bogad articulates in "Tactical Carnival". Duncombe asks us to imagine an ethical spectacle, adding that such a thing exists only in the realm of fantasy, the subject of his inquiry. He asks us to ignore this fact, and in the spirit of "doing things with words," (Austin) invites the reader to call the fantastic into reality by naming it and thus making it real. Duncombe invites us to "perform" the dream. The *Bewegungschor* performs just this sort of dream.

The *Bewegungschor* concept emerged in the sea of social upheaval that was turn-of-the-century Europe, developed during WWI and the decades which followed it, only to be swallowed up by the Nazi machine on the march to WWII. This group movement form has had a long and embattled history with appropriations for labor organizing, socialist political demonstrations, religious rites, artistic events, and National Socialism. Its hallmarks are multivalent expression by engaged individuals and cohesive expression of

the collective to which they belong. How can these seemingly opposed dimensions both live in the same form? They exist and evolve through a group creative process that honors both the individual and the group. This paper presents key aspects of that form, their philosophy and development, and then examines canonical exponents of the form in the context of oppositional social movements. I also consider oppositional social movements whose unique strategies parallel aspects of this form in their own unique ways, particularly Critical Mass, Global Wakeup Call, and Bioneers.

## History and Origins in Early 20th Century Oppositional Social Movements

At the dawn of the 20th century an international community of social activists, artists and visionaries disgusted with Europe's race toward a dislocated and alienated industrial future set about "dreaming" and "performing" their own utopian vision for society into reality. They created an alternative community in the Swiss alps on the Lago Maggiore, which separates Italy from Switzerland. Ascona was (and remains) a breathtakingly beautiful village that served as home-base and refuge for artists and activists frustrated with the values of increasingly industrial and urban 19th Century Europe. Martin Green has called this place and time, "the Ascona period, when people of sensibility were so bitterly hostile to their governments that they called themselves rebels."(Green 69) And he chronicles the development of this counterculture mecca and its visionary creators in his 1986 *Mountain of Truth: The Counterculture Begins, Ascona 1900-1920.*

> "The feminism, pacifism, and psychoanalysis we now know all took an imprint from these people. So did Dada, Surrealism, Modern Dance, and much modern fiction. Some of the famous names involved are Hermann Hesse, D. H. Lawrence, Franz Kafka, Isadora Duncan, Rudolf Laban, Carl Gustav Jung; but there are also other, newer names which deserve fame." (Green 1)

Green takes his title from the nature cure sanatorium built in Ascona by vegetarians in 1900, Monte Verita, where activists Otto Grass and Gusto Grässer established an arts commune in 1905. Imagine the alternative communities of Harbin Hot-springs or Esalen nestled in mountainous regions of California, but transposed to a historical moment when the intelligentsia is brimming with visions of Marx and Nietzsche, and the primary topic of conversation is how to shake society out of its passivity so that individuals feel connected and engaged in their communities. Green cites the 1960s film *Ceremony at Big Sur* as evoking the Asconan ethos in its shared landscape, costume, dance, sun worship, and counter culture objectives.

Bogad mobilizes Fraser's notion of "subaltern counterpublics" to point out that "alternative worldviews need alternative space in which to be developed and shared."[1]

[1] Fraser's work intervenes in Jurgan Habermas' definition of the (bourgeois) public sphere as a virtual or imaginary community, not existing in any identifiable space, and "made up of private people gathered together as a public and articulating the needs of society with the state." (*The Structural Transformation of the Public Sphere*, German 1962, English 1989, quoted in Soules) In the 1950s Habermas was a student of

(Cohen-Cruz, Schutzman and Bogad 47) Social dissenters of the turn of the century found this venue in Ascona. This mountain retreat became their venue "in which to undertake communicative processes that were not, as it were, under the supervision of the dominant group." (Fraser) It is here that this community of artists and activists developed its collective action frame, this "necessary precursor to a powerful social movement." (Cohen-Cruz, Schutzman and Bogad 48). The "hidden transcript" (Scott) they nurtured was already well articulated by social commentators of the day. Asconans shared a strong belief in the need for a large-scale return to the sociality, communality and embodied relationship to the earth of the pre-industrial era. They felt oppressed by the dominant social order of dislocation and alienation and sought an alternative to the dominant bourgeois public sphere. Their philosophical hero and ideological support was Nietzsche, who advocated the creation of new norms and values and described life as an experience lived beyond the confines of conventional borders. Nietzsche's description of Apolline and Dionysian opposites fit the Asconans' rejection of society's reasoned and consciously ordered forms, this Apolline world of appearances. Like Nietzsche they sought to nurture Dionysian inner reality and "blissful ecstasy" as celebrated by pre-Socratic Greeks in spring festivals of rebirth and renewal. (Kew 75)

In her award-winning study of the cooptation of physical culture by the Nazis, "Uniform Bodies: Mass Movement and Modern Totalitarianism," Mary Anne Santos Newhall describes Ascona as a utopian experiment bringing dance and community together. She cites a description of this "alternative community, wherein 'congregated everyone who could be considered to be among the counterculture of the period between the turn of the century and the end of World War I.'"(Müller and Servos, 22) Here artists communed with feminists, Dadaists, anarchists, vegetarians, communists, and anthroposophists. The dancers of the community helped hold together these different points of view by creating participatory rituals and festivals. Early Asconan settlers established a tradition of inviting dancers and movement researchers to participate in their community. Asconans envisaged dance as part of a greater integrated society and as an essential element of revolt against repressive physical and mental confines of bourgeois ideology. (Aschheim 59) Isadora Duncan taught summer workshops, and Rudolf Laban also came first as a summer artist in residence from his winter studio 200 kilometers away in Zurich. Laban so fully embraced the Asconan ethos that he wintered over and lived out the brutal war years there as a key contributor to the community.

Laban and his collaborators, including famed dancers Suzanne* Perrottet and Mary

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Horkeimer and Adorno in the Frankfurt School for Social Research, where his interest in the public sphere served his inquiry into the conditions necessary for genuine democracy. (Kellner) It is interesting to locate this inquiry in time and space on the heels of fascist devastation, the antithesis of the democratic utopia Asconans had been advocating. Fraser points out that access to a Habermasian public sphere is contingent on status, gender, ethnicity, property ownership, and other inequalities; and that "there are no naturally given, a priori boundaries" between public and private. Matters considered public over here may be private over there and as such swept out of public concern. Fraser holds that marginalized groups form their own public spheres, or "subaltern counterpublics."

Wigman, were regular attendees of the Dada's Cabaret Voltaire, which opened in Zurich in February 1916 only 200 km away from Ascona. Although Laban and Wigman never performed in the Cabaret, Perrottet and others did, such that almost all Dada soirées included performances by members of the Laban School. (Doerr 66) Laban was sympathetic to Dada frustrations and artistic experimentation, but his methodology and philosophy differed in that he aspired to engage, rather than to shock or provoke. His intervention into social dislocation was to create structures that embrace participation by individuals in collective movement, rather than to represent exaggerated dislocations as per Dada's style of extreme staging and poetics. Despite tactical differences in mode of production and intervention, these collegial artistic and activist impulses engaged in a dialog of mutual support. Hugo Ball boasted in the first Dada publication that "Monsieur Laban was present at the performance and was very enthusiastic."(Zurich, May 1916, quoted in Richter) Likewise Dadaists performed in Laban's school in a spirit of dialogic exchange and experimentation. (Doerr 64)

Like the French revolutionaries ("those firebrands of that first revolution of modernity") the Asconans turned to secular festival and ritual to reinforce a radically altered social order: ancient worship of the sun reemerged in both Asconan and French revolutionary iconography. (Newhall 28) In August 1917 Laban's group presented a twelve hour, open air "choral play" in Ascona called *Sun Festival*. Laban's modern adaptation of the ancient choric principle was to include individual improvisational responses to a basic movement score as part of a collective statement. It is this inclusivity, this invitation to the individual that is the root of the dual emphasis on both individual and collective in the *Bewegungschor*. At Monte Verita Laban's interest in ancient ritual and agrarian community led him to "renunciation of all civilizational impulses" (Laban A Life for Dance : Reminiscences 135). The Asconan drive to create a *neue Weltanschauung* paradoxically mobilizes archaic rites and iconography. (Newhall 29)

These early experiments in community ritual and festival grew into the Movement Choir form which became popular throughout Germany over the following two decades, culminating in massive events with thousands of participants in the 1930s, and with Laban's expulsion from Hitler's Germany. These mass displays are of course images which today we associate with the obedient bodies of the Third Reich, in spite of the ironic fact that Nazi obedience and monologism are anathema to their initial impulse. The Movement Choir was a form born in a dialogical field of creative experimentation, cross fertilization and Dionysian celebration of the individual's humanity. It is the choir's potential for unison mass movement which appealed to totalitarian ideologues and which they narrowed and co-opted while rejecting its ethos of experimentation and extinguishing its celebration of diversity.

Sidney Tarrow cites "contentious collective action" as the basis of all social movements, because "it is the main and often the only recourse that ordinary people possess against better-equipped opponents or powerful states." In addition to their work contending, Tarrow acknowledges that movements also build organizations, elaborate ideologies, socialize and mobilize constituencies, and "engage in self-development and the construction of collective identities." (Tarrow 3) Viewed on Tarrow's model the enclave

at Ascona reads as part reclusive commune and part activist breeding ground: the methods of the Asconans were partly reclusive, but also activist.

Tarrow includes in his discussion social movements which are "profoundly apolitical" and which "focus on their internal lives or those of their members," because such movements also "encounter authorities in conflictual ways." (Tarrow 3) If we consider Ascona as an artist commune, we might see Ascona as this more internally oriented enclave that has chosen a remote mountain location specifically to avoid such conflictual encounters. Local villagers spoke of their neighbors in the woods as "crazies" and indeed their ramshackle huts, nudism, and foot-long beards seemed to invite such mockery. But this view misses the revolutionary intentions of those who lived, worked, and played there. Asconans also actively exported their utopian vision. They spoke publicly about their work and philosophy in lectures and demonstrations all over Europe; they also taught and published extensively, and assisted in organizing communes throughout Germany during a brief flourishing of the "communitarian" movement after WWI. The initial impetus for Laban to develop his movement notation system, now known as Labanotation, was to facilitate the revolutionary teaching of *Bewegungschöre* and *Festkultur*. The Asconan *weltanschauung* was not just for private consumption, but part of a grand plan for social reinvigoration and transformation.

## *Festkultur* as an Oppositional Social Movement in Weimar Germany

When WWI ended, confirming for many the inherent destructiveness of dominant values, Asconans sprang to action to rebuild society according to their own values, informed by their disgust for the war as an undeniable indictment of contemporary society. In 1920 Laban wrote *Die Welt des Tänzers* in which he further describes his vision for movement as building culture, such that embodiment plays a critical role in shaping the general culture.[2] "For me, dancer means that new man who does not create his consciousness out of the brutality of [mere] thinking, feeling, or willing." Laban's ideal is of engaged humans living in community in which body mind and spirit are both valued. This vision of embodiment had been warmly welcomed and nurtured in Ascona. Throughout the 20s and early 1930s Laban Schools flourished with associated lay and professional Movement Choirs taking root in all major German cities. After WWI ideas that had been nurtured in Ascona also influenced the communitarian movement with communes being established according to the Asconan model in Bavaria, Swabia, and the Rhineland by social dissenters wanting "to withdraw from society in disgust."(Green 70)

In his 1920 essay "*Kultische Bildung im Feste*" (Cultic education in Festivals), Laban sounds like Duncombe and Bogad declaring that all dreams of Paradise are filled in festivals. Laban envisions a world populated by festive communities, in which people express their dreams by means of festive events. He mourns society's degrading of the festive impulse by limiting it to superstition, séances and bordellos.(Green 223) Laban's

[2] I'm interested in this description of subjectivity as related to habitus, engagement, embodiment. (Green 223)

ideal community space is wide open and fully embodied. He appeals to all organizers of public gatherings to teach insight rather than rote parroting of rules; he advocates events such as group games that "do not teach laws, but awaken the feeling for law keeping… Not rules but insights will education the understanding."(Laban "Laban, Fest" quoted in Green 223) Laban's *Festkultur* demands interactivity and individual engagement. Here Laban departs from the unconscious, ecstatic state of the Dionysian festival that Nietzsche advocates and incorporates a modern individuality.[3][4] Laban's festival of engaged individuals sounds like Bogad's "Tactical Carnival" with its mockery of monological chants even when they are chanted in the service of venerable social goals: "Hey, hey, Ho, Ho – 'Hey Hey Ho Ho' Has Got To Go!" Laban's public event is a participatory opening space event. It is not a top-down, choreographed demonstration with a monological drone that occupies all available space.

**We are the ones who… *Bewegungschor* and Collective Identity**

In his outline of Tactical Carnival, Bogad points to the centrality of performance in oppositional social movements: "Performance, both public and private, is a key element in the formation, sustenance, and building of such social movements." (Cohen-Cruz, Schutzman and Bogad 47) Newhall echoes this observation: "Dance had long been at the heart of ritual festival, along with communal singing and drumming or music making. Just as revolution inspires songs … dance movement arises to accompany revolution." (Newhall 28) Even in that first revolution of modernity, French revolutionaries united bodies into a public corpus through festival. Processions and performances in symbolic locations gave embodied presence to the new order. And the secular cosmology they favored resonated anew in the early 20th Century among new revolutionaries in Ascona: both movements returned to natural and agrarian imagery and an ancient worship of the

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[3] Nietzsche's *Birth of Tragedy* describes a "blissful ecstasy" which "pays no heed to the individual, but even seeks to destroy individuality and redeem it with a mystical sense of unity." (Nietzsche quoted in Kew 75)

[4] This tension between individual and community desires was felt in Germany's powerful and fractious Youth Movement of the time as well:

> "Leaders of the Youth Movement were well aware of the need to reconcile the tension between Nietzsche's individualist stance and the burgeoning drive to incorporate him within collective and national frameworks. Eugen Diederichs held that the tension could be resolved in a new kind of fusion. Diederichs's Nietzsche made sense only when transfigured into a larger whole." Steven E. Aschheim, The Nietzsche Legacy in Germany, 1890-1990, (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1992), <http://ark.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/ft5290061g/>.[4]

The Weimar years experienced a blurring of philosophical interests. Even nationalist student fraternities, vociferously both nationalist and Christian, find enough to admire in Nietzsche that they struggle constantly with reconciling their own ambivalence toward his ideas. The leading journal of this social movement proclaims that "a healthy culture, a healthy national life requires Dionysian devotion." [4]quoted in Aschheim, The Nietzsche Legacy in Germany, 1890-1990.

sun – “pure fire, eternal eye, soul and source of all the world.” (Newhall)

Why is physical movement so unifying? Historian William McNeil has coined the phrase “muscular bonding” to describe the euphoric feeling, a combination of visceral and emotional sensations, that arises from moving in unison with other bodies. His research suggests that the urge to move together in rhythm is so deep-seated in human experience that it is often assumed to be instinctive. The complex movement skills required to coordinate the sympathetic and parasympathetic nervous systems in rhythmic stepping or other unison movement are preverbal and, in McNeill’s view, connect humanity to a collective prehistory.(McNeill) Anthropologist Ellen Dissanayake also suggests that the public performance of movement reinforces social cohesion both as a means and an end.(Newhall) Physical therapist and Laban protégé Irmgard Bartenieff also emphasizes the embedded nature of form and content in movement: “Body movement is not a symbol for expression; it *is* the expression.” (quoted in Hackney Making Connections 45) When people are moving together they are not simply expressing shared identity or shared purpose, the movement *is* that shared identity. They are in each moment confirming, renewing, *moving* their shared purpose.

Socialist and labor organizer Martin Gleisner was a close associate of Laban, author of *Tanz für alle, von der gymnastik zum gemeinschaftstanz (Dance for all, from gymnastics to community dance, 1927)*, and a Berlin-based organizer of movement choirs for the labor movement. He observes this social cohesion created by communities moving together in a 1979 article commemorating the centenary of Laban’s birth: “When ten or a hundred people do the same thing the result has something of the essence of the community, of human beings, of people, en masse.” Gleisner quotes Laban as saying “it is the central task of movement choirs to awake and let radiate more and more strongly a sense, a basic sense for reaching essential humanity.” (Gleisner)

Bogad reminds us of the centrality of shared meaning, sense of shared identity and shared grievances to creating a social movement: “without a sense of shared grievance, purpose, and possibility, an effective social movement does not develop.” He explains further that such a sense of shared meaning and history serves to galvanize movement members in the face of escalating violence and danger. (Cohen-Cruz, Schutzman and Bogad 48) Hollywood copywriter Al Scalpone may have been on to something in 1947 when he wrote the now clichéd line that “the family that prays together stays together” to describe the mission of the Family Theater radio show. ("Family Theater Productions") Following the reasoning of such social theorists as Bogad, Fraser, and McNeill, and Manning, we might also add that “the (activist) community that sways together stays together.” Physical movement can be a powerful binding force for social movements. The Asconans were clear about this galvanizing power of moving together in community and made a practice of inviting movement practitioners and researchers to lead workshops and conduct their research as members of the community.

Bogad hails Boal’s Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) workshops as a vital resource for members of an oppositional movement to “define their issues and explore possible solutions” (Cohen-Cruz, Schutzman and Bogad 49). *Bewegungschöre* are another

embodied medium and method to tease out and explore hidden transcripts. The group creative process involved in "dreaming up" a movement theme and its choreography takes collaborators through an identity building investigation of their values and requires them to develop negotiating skills and strategies. There are many ways to bring groups together to explore and discover commonalities and theatrical methods have been effective in this regard since humans first began "doing theater." The particular value of the movement choir is its emphasis on both individual voice and contribution to a collective whole. The structure of the choir values both.

This collective creative process is dialogic in the high value it places on contribution from all collected voices. There is an inherent multivocality both in process and in product. One of the hallmarks of *Bewegungschöre* as the were developed in the 20s and 30s is their simultaneous embodiment of difference. Choir facilitators and directors would often divide the group into sections that each explore movement at different levels, high, medium, and low. (Counsell) All three levels are thus simultaneously present as part of a coherent whole, rather than moving in simple unison as a sort of monological drone with blind obedience to a single ideology. Multivalence is integral to the coherent whole. The choirs perform dialogism.

In his consideration of the performative work of the early movement choirs, Counsel describes an ongoing balance between chaos and social cohesion. He sees a social whole that is in constant danger of falling apart if any one of dozens (or hundreds) of participants fails to arrive in the right spot at the right time, etc. Each group form that nevertheless succeeds in coalescing thus reaffirms the community, such that individual participants are not just talking about or representing community, but embodying it, living it, being it. "The movement *is* the expression." (Bartenieff) Counsell is particularly interested in the way early choirs perform community by denying spectatorship. Originally movement choirs were not designed as performance events, but for active participation. Even in choirs that eventually did invite spectators Counsel sees a performance event which heightens the sense of collective engagement. The movement choirs call coherent and collaborative community into being in such a way that each participant is actively engaged and important to the whole. Participants in the movement are constantly navigating and negotiating shared space, shared identity, shared purpose, with each individual contributing a unique part of the overall image. Counsell describes the movement choir as an experience of perpetual danger, a community under constant threat of dissolution, where dissolution is always part of the image and group negotiation with a goal of returning to and affirming coherence is present in each moment.

In addition to its processual value to oppositional movements in defining and refining collective identity and in training members to cooperate and negotiate, the movement choir offers critical value in its performative nature. Denying spectatorship denies the dominant social paradigm of isolated, bourgeois subject distant and distinct from a consumable commodity. Participants embody and inhabit their goals. Their subjectivity is shared. Just as Theatre of the Oppressed (TO) strives to minimize hierarchy and thus ruptures traditional modes of organizing, so does the movement choir present its own utopian view of a multivalent community that invites individual interpretation and where

every voice matters.

Peggy Hackney and her colleagues at Integrated Movement Studies have developed a contemporary approach to the Movement Choir's multivalent, dialogical, creative group process that borrows language from author and movement therapist Janet Adler. They pose to a group the open suggestions "I am the one who…" and "We are the ones who…" and facilitate the weaving of individual and collective responses. This weaving process necessarily involves dreaming visions into being in a fashion that Duncombe would appreciate, articulating hidden transcripts in a fashion that Scott would appreciate, and dialogic opening space in a fashion that Bogad would appreciate. Adler's language emerges from her interest in "The Collective" as part of a mystical tradition in direct knowing.[5] (Hackney "We Are the Ones Who...") Thus this contemporary articulation recalls the Asconans' original intention to nurture and develop their counterculture community through ritual festival celebration.

**Opening Space vs. Occupying Space**

One key goal for public demonstrations is to define collective identity for a group, subculture or movement. Bogad articulates a rubric for analyzing the dramaturgy of public space to query just what sort of collective identity is being defined. (Cohen-Cruz, Schutzman and Bogad 51) Counsell undertakes such queries into the dramaturgy of the *Bewegungschor*, specifically exploring the performance of the form.

Bogad criticizes what he terms the "occupying space" style of demonstration for its uniformity, which can be "boring and uncompelling" in its monologic simplification and repetition of the movement's transcript (previously hidden from the general public, but now expressed). Bogad advocates instead a model of "opening public space" in such a way that "the average participant can contribute creatively to the dramaturgy of the protest." (Cohen-Cruz, Schutzman and Bogad 52) Bogad advances TO as such a model. *Bewegungschor* is another such opening space model. As Counsell articulates, movement choir participants are all active in their dialogic presencing of a new relationship to society and to the space it inhabits. Like TO, the movement choir "attempts to open a space for collective and individual." (Cohen-Cruz, Schutzman and Bogad 52) Even in tightly scripted choirs analyzed by Counsell participants and spectators are aware of the powerful dual emphasis on both individual and collective action. Movement choirs invite participants to contribute creatively so that the resulting choreography embodies both collective and individual transcripts.

Counsell observes that even in tightly scripted events where participants learn pre-scripted movement, one hallmark of the early movement choirs was their abstract nature, such that interpretation was not prescribed, but open. This is open character is one aspect that damned Laban's version of mass movement in Goebbels' eye. A totalitarian ideology

[5] Adler holds a PhD in Mystical Studies

has no room for individual interpretation. The open nature of the movement choir threatens monological ideology.

On the other end of the spectrum, there are movement choir events in which all the choreography arises from individual and collected voices through group creative process. Critical Mass is an example of a movement choir that invites creative contributions to a shared theme of biking through city streets. The Xerocratic[6] organizing principle means that themes and embodiment of those themes are entirely supplied by the individuals who participate. Absurd Response to an Absurd War as described by Bogad in "Tactical Carnival" also invites creative response to a theme in this way. Mud People was an opening space phenomenon that erupted annually in downtown San Francisco between 2986 and the late 1990's and which continues to erupt in other cities. Dozens of bodies slathered in mud revel in nonverbal play and mayhem in and among the financial district lunch crowd. What gives these events their anarchic, wild feel is their improvisational quality. The emphasis is on creativity and individual participation in the moment in a way that heightens the feeling of open space. Even though the score may actually be tightly scripted by costume, character or shared movement dynamics, the improvisational aspect makes it feel as though "anything" could happen. Group cohesion emerges from a complex constellation of movement qualities, rather than from rehearsed unison – not simply McNeill's muscular bonding, but shared values. The effect opens space all the wider for individual participation, creativity and engagement.

San Francisco's Day of the Dead ritual celebration is not overtly political in agenda and yet it is a clear exponent of the opening space ethos, where unique individuals and groups each work up their own creative response to a theme, in this case spiritual in nature. Individuals and groups open the public space of San Francisco's Mission District for dialogue between groups, between marchers and spectators, between living and dead. Participating in such a joyous and creative celebration in a public space serves to make both participants and spectators all the more amenable to participate in politically motivated actions. The embodied experience of opening space empowers participants to repeat and recreate this opening in other contexts. A space opened for one purpose becomes easier to reopen for another. Such an active engagement of all participants in community was a powerful motivating agenda for Asconans and remains so for advocates of the "opening space message."

**Modularity**

[6] The term xerocracy is sometimes attributed to Chris Carlsson, activist and archivist of Critical Mass, an ad hoc celebration of biking that originated in San Francisco in 1992. In 1993 Carlsson describes xerocracy to mean that "anybody who wants to make point of view or tell a story or get a map out of where they want us to go, is in the same position to just make it and xerox it, 150 copes, 250, 500." Wordspy.com also cites an earlier use of the term to describe rule by underground broadsheets in Iran after the revolution that ousted the Shah in 1979. (wordspy.com/words/zerocracy.asp)

Sidney Tarrow describes the "repertoire of contention" as culturally inscribed and socially communicated conventions that become part of society's public culture, such as strikes, marches, petitions, boycotts, etc. Social movements are "repositories" of this public knowledge and mobilize these routines of action in ways that help the movements overcome deficits in resources and communication. (Tarrow 20-21) Tarrow emphasizes the modularity of the repertoire of contention as being particularly useful for mobilizing action in multiple locations simultaneously, across language, national, and cultural barriers. (Tarrow 39-41) Establishing the modularity of *Bewegungschor* within the social repertoire was a powerful motivating goal behind the development of Labanotation (system of movement notation still in active use today) and the establishment of Laban schools throughout Germany during the Weimar years. Laban and his students were dedicated to the reformation and reengagement of their dislocated and alienated society and their vision was met with such enthusiastic reception that schools rapidly proliferated. Movement motifs were easily shared across distances and large scale collaborations were relatively easy to organize for both contentious and cathartic ends. By 1936 Laban was able to organize over a thousand participants in his Olympic choir. Such a vast undertaking was only possible because of the modularity of the *Bewegungschor* structure.

Modularity continues to allow the Movement Choir form to be used for diverse oppositional actions such as Bioneers Movement Choir on October 16-19, 2009; the Global Climate Wake-up Call on September 21, 2009; The Ins and Outs of Water in NYC on June 29, 2009 (sponsored by the Laban/Bartenieff Institute of Movement Studies); and ongoing Grow and Tell Community Events. In October of 2009 two somatic movement therapists trained in Laban style Movement Choir facilitated a Movement Choir at the Bioneers Sustainability Conference in Ithaca, NY, "designed to build connections within the sustainability community" and to "generate collective action and momentum on our communal cause."(Bioneers) Embodying Peace is a web-based resource for such movement-based activist projects as the Bioneers event, many of which use Movement Choir as one of their primary strategies of contention and identity formation. (Peace)

The September 21, 2009 Global Wakeup Call sponsored by TckTckTck and Avaaz.org as a day of climate action was a movement choir score. Here the theme was externally proposed by the organizers and individual groups were invited to interpret that theme according to their own creative impulses resulting in over 3,000 events in 130 countries. (Climate Action Network) This is a similar strategy of modular application to the open application of TO techniques espoused by Bogad, where organizers recognize that "an action must be adapted to local needs, dangers, cultures, and legal/sociopolitical contexts… TO facilitators must remember that TO techniques are meant to serve the local, specific and ever-changing needs of spect-actors…" Bogad reminds us that such a modular form remains valid "… only to the extent that groups feel free to adapt and change its form." (Cohen-Cruz, Schutzman and Bogad 50) One article about these activist interventions hailed the festive and ludic nature of the creative responses to the theme, recalling Nietzsche, Laban and Bogad: "'Climate Week' Kicks Off in NYC: Activism, Politics, Pranks To Come." (Gertz)

There is open debate in contemporary Laban circles about using the Movement Choir concept to describe the recent phenomenon of “flash mobs.” Questions arise as to the degree of directed choreography and dramaturgy versus shared, collaborative creation. This gray area was of concern in Laban’s day as well: some choirs are mostly generated internally by the participants and some mostly externally by directors. Master teacher Peggy Hackney recently opened this very issue on the international Laban Movement Analysis list-serve: “When I lead a Movement Choir I want to have each individual participating in some way in the construction of the Choir---otherwise, in my mind it is a choreographed piece. What do the rest of you think??”(Bishko et al.) Another issue in Laban’s day was that of participation (not unlike Fraser’s particular intervention into Habermasian generalization), with some “elitist” choirs (such as Wigman and Perrottet) working with only trained dancers and other “lay” choirs working with amateurs (such as Gertz and Gleisner). The current consensus seems to be that most flash mobs are simply choreography, either rehearsed in advance, or so simple that they require no rehearsal. But for a movement choir to embody the spirit of Laban’s legacy, it would be “a culmination of many people's contributions, usually based around a common theme." (Bishko et al.)

The Oprah Winfrey Show staged what they called a “flash mob” in the streets of Chicago to open their 24th season. Over 20,000 people learned set choreography from one of 20 professional dancers who taught the movement to 800 volunteers during the week leading up to the event. These 800 in turn assisted in teaching the dance to the other 19,200 participants on the day of the event. Clearly this is not an oppositional social movement, but it is hailed on the blogosphere as a triumph of collective expression and could easily be confused as an opening space event based on the euphoria with which it is received. Certainly it is a triumph of modularity, in this instance mobilized in the service of mass media. That a single choreographer can teach 20,000 dancers so well that they feel they “own” the movement in just a few days is indeed a tremendous achievement.(Show "Oprah's Kickoff Party Dance")

Australian director Michael Gracey directed this commercial “flash mob” as well as T-Mobile’s “Dance” (January 2009) and “Sing-along” (May 2009), in which 13,500 people gather in London’s Trafalgar Square to sing pop songs as prompted by T-Mobile via their cell phones. Gracey is inspired by the way these events “bring people together in a fundamentally different way” – in a spirit of participation and shared purpose.(Vagnoni) "There's something really special when you take an audience and instead of just being passive and watching, you invite them to participate." (Show "24th Season Kickoff: How Did They Do That?") Gracey’s goal is audience participation, but of a particular uniform nature, one that fits his directorial vision and that of his employer. Goebbels’ goal was also audience participation, but of a particular monological kind, also one that suited his employer, the Nazi party. A comment on one of many YouTube and other video sites where people share the “I gotta feelin” (sic) event claims, “I’m addicted to this video!” McNeill would suggest that this viewer is addicted to muscular bonding. Bogad, Laban, and Gleisner would suggest s/he overcome this addiction by engaging in a participatory

event that engages individual creativity as well as collective, where each individual is invited to respond rather than to parrot sound and/or movement.[7]

The thrill of coming together to share uniform expression can be intoxicating (and addicting according to at least one YouTube viewer). Ask any rock concert or football fan. The danger of confusing internally motivated expression with externally directed expression is that we can find ourselves marching off to wars, being swept away by "a feelin'". Bogad's distinction between opening and occupying space is helpful here. The participants, full of their collective expression and muscular bonding, may feel they are opening a public space to a new level of communication between audience and band (The Black-Eyed Peas) in a way that inspired the Peas' "best performance ever." This space is being opened for this particular expression, but for how many others? Is there room in this space for alternate choreography or points of view? Certainly none that survived the post production editing process at Harpo Productions, Inc. which owns and produces OPRAH.

**Laban and Ideology**

Laban worried about his dialogical form being mobilized for ideological ends. In his 1935 autobiography *Ein Leben Für Tanz* (*A life for dance: reminiscences*, English translation 1975) Laban separates the dance movement experience from the communication of 'ideological, political and scientific ideas'. He cautions against conscious representation of ideology in dance, because 'the movement experience retreated into the background.' The role of the movement choir in political demonstrations was hotly debated, with Laban defending an agenda of cultural development and specifically cautioning against using this form for ideological purposes.

Laban was responding to activist actions by his student-collaborators Jenny Gertz, Martin Gleisner and others who were mobilizing choric movement to organize laborers in Socialist labor rallies.(Preston-Dunlop and Lahusen 28) Throughout the 20's Laban's choric work *Lichtwende* (Dawning Light, 1923) was frequently staged by leftist colleagues at a variety of political celebrations and rallies such that it became a "cult object of the workers' movement" and his political affiliations were regularly confused in the press. He repeatedly distanced himself from politics by emphasizing a personal focus on culture rather than specific content; playbills for *Lichtwende* note that the work is "not in the service of some particular mythology of biased form of ideology." (Doerr 111) Laban's 1935 condemnation is ironic in that it chastises the use of movement choirs for ideological purpose from a point of view squarely situated in *Völkish* ideology, a common current among social change activists at the turn of the century and during the Weimar years.(Kew) Laban's worry about ideological ends is all the more painfully

[7] Gleisner wrote extensively about the deadening effects of rote movement repetition popular in the 1910s and 20s. He argued convincingly for movement practices that engage the mind creatively with the body.

ironic in the context of his complicated and ambiguous collaboration with the Nazis,[8] and in the context of their wholesale cooptation of his celebrating the human urge to move in concert with other bodies. Just at the moment that his closest colleagues were leaving the country, Laban and the Nazis became mutually fascinated by one another's approach to mass movement. Laban saw the potential for his ideas finally to come to fruition on a national scale.

**The specter of fascism.**

Unfortunately, bodies reveling in the community spirit and opening space events of the Weimar years found themselves easily swept into the occupying space demonstrations full of bodies obedient to the external monologism that was part and parcel of fascist ideology. Laban actually believed that his speech before the final dress rehearsal of his magnum opus *Vom Tauwind* would be well received by the chief ideologue of the Nazi party:

> We do not need to believe in dogmatic explanations, in philosophical systems or in circumstantial calculations to understand the will of life, which fills our whole being. It upsets our natural harmonic condition if we try to find the first source and the final goal outside ourselves…

Laban was mystified that his message not only lost him his job, but endangered all who had been associated with him. Manning explains this specter of cooptation, by reminding us of context. "In order to understand Laban's relation to fascism one must trace the transmutation of the Asconan idea from a Swiss village to the cultural centers of Weimar Germany." (Manning "Review: Reinterpreting Laban" 320) What the body knows in one socio-political context may translate disastrously in another. Bogad's and Counsell's dramaturgical questions are critical here. Who are the architects of the parade I march in? I may not wish to join this revolution if I can't dance in it; on the other hand, I shouldn't join that revolution just because I can.

In the movement choir Counsell describes a movement event in which spatially high, medium and low levels are in constant flux and offer ongoingly shifting viewpoints. In this way a movement choir presents dialogic diversity rather than monologic unity. Bogad invites us to redefine unity not as unison, but as variations on a theme. (Cohen-Cruz, Schutzman and Bogad 54) So it is with the ongoing fluxus of a movement choir. In political organizing the decentralized affinity group model is a source of strength because it is ultra democratic. The consensus process can be slow and cumbersome, but it's also a source of strength and it embodies the vision for social reformation that it espouses. Its organizing principle performs its social agenda. Form and content are integrated, embedded. We can think of spokescouncil meetings as an example of Hackney's "We are the ones who..." inquiry applied to activist organizations. It is

[8] Laban never joined the Nazi (or any) party, but in 1934 Laban accepted the directorship of the Nazis' *Deutschen Tanzbühne* (German Dance Theater) and responsibility for creating the entire German dance program.

important also to acknowledge the individual voices who come together at each moment reiterating a personal version of "I am the one who…" This ongoing reminder of individual values places personal checks and balances on the specter of fascism and cooptation that Manning warns against. If I am regularly checking in with my personal values and making sure they fit with the values of the collective, then both the personal and the collective value systems are in constant redress. I lower my risk of being swept into a movement that I no longer value, or whose agenda has shifted while I was looking the other way or while I was busy dancing in the revolution.

WWI devastation accelerated the transformation of Europe into mass consciousness. Classes broke down. Demographic devastation cut through all classes transforming them into masses. (Arendt 329, quoted in Newhall) The war brought the imperial era to an end, creating the ideological vacuum that totalitarian ideology quickly filled, absorbing every available thing, including movement practices of the day. At first the Nazis incorporated current practices. Then they would pick and choose those best suited to their ultimate end while violently suppressing those that posed a threat. Newhall describes similar process of incorporation of the leftist New Dance Group by the New Deal in 1932. "The radical left in the United States and the revolutionary dance movement did not die from lack of interest. They were co-opted by the New Deal." (Newhall 42) This tendency of the dominant regime to incorporate oppositional groups is a common practice. Cat and mouse. We were activists organizing the workers, now we are administrators working for the government. The Kabouters were squatters agitating for housing reform, they became landlords with leaky faucets to fix. We see a similar pattern in 1970s and 1980s arts funding initiatives masterminded by the neo-liberal agenda to diffuse the activist impulse of artists working in disenfranchised areas. Transform them into administrators of community arts organizations that will provide the community with an outlet for their complaints. The activists are now preoccupied with their administrative roles funded by the government and the potentially restive community redirects its concerns into harmless plastic art projects, rather than property damage and other forms of protest. (Harvey)

It is important continually to renew and support the dialogic nature of these openings. Duncombe stresses that "an embodied theory of mass activity is competing against the idealized theory of capitalism that celebrates the self-gratifying individual." (quoted in Cohen-Cruz, Schutzman and Bogad 56) National Socialist mass demonstrations similarly competed against the generally perceived enemies of the day: social dislocation and alimentation, passivity. That particular "lived imaginary" led down a different totalizing path of destruction. And participants marched along, even as participating individuals had perhaps intended utopian visions of harmony rather than of world war. The question remains open as to how we can open space to hold multiple utopian visions simultaneously. We cannot both allow abortion and make it illegal to "kill" an unborn child. Some utopias are mutually exclusive.

Is a Movement Choir liberatory in the Bakhtinian sense of the carnivalesque, mobilizing a steam-valve of catharsis that defuses and diffuses a group's desire for change? One can argue that Laban and other Asconans were conservative in their call for a return to

agrarian communality. And that the coming together in civic and labor guilds for celebratory Feierabend (festival evenings) served a cathartic impulse. One could make similar claims about Mud People or other multivalent demonstrations. Just as the use of irony in demonstrations can easily lead to misunderstanding, so does the open work invite a multitude of readings. What relieves one person of their urge to take action may inspire another to take further action. It is also true that the message embodied in the Movement Choir form itself performs a new vision for social navigation of the forces that threaten social cohesion. Collective dissolution is a perpetual threat. But rather than give in to that threat each individual plays a unique and critical role in supporting the community. Participating in a movement choir is cathartic, and it is part of an ongoing stance of engagement. *Festkultur* is an ongoing culture of daily engagement with creativity and community.

The Asconan agenda straddles both the imperial and modern eras. The movement choir's dual emphasis on individuality and choric movement reflect this diversity. As much as Laban tried to bend his principles to suit his new post as head of the *Deutsche Tanzbühne*, the full development of the individual was core to his belief system and to his movement principles. Whereas the Nazis has been looking forward to taking advantage of Laban's ability to organize masses people, they hadn't realized he also nurtured their humanity and individuality. Where Laban's movement choir emphasized the inner development of the individual, the Nazi emphasis on conformity was opposed and irreconcilable. Laban was modernist in his pluralism. Goebbels was not. The tensions between their points of view are still active in our daily lives and their test of wills is a game we still play every day.

All power to the imagination!
~ Situationist graffiti in Paris, May 1968 (Duncombe v)

(Manning "Ideology and Performance between Weimar and the Third Reich: The Case Of "Totenmal"")

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