

# Putting “Normal” through the Grinder

Antonia Baehr’s new dance piece interrogates our established ideas of masculine and feminine.

BY ANTKÉ ENGEL

A threesome. A constellation characterized by standstill only in the rarest of cases. In contexts where coupledom constitutes the organizing principle, a triad agitates – but the threesome (in German, *Dreisamkeit*, “threesome-ness”) is also a driving force of erotic exchange. A recurring question in *Normal Dance*: which dancer will win a place in the sun? A temporary pleasure. Sometimes, one of them gets there too late. Sometimes panic strikes. Does one of them desire to be a sun? Or is it more attractive to sound out the peripheral shadow position? The stage as a car, doubled for a short time through an exceedingly small interior with no door, harbors a movement experiment that plumbs the depths of the conditions of interpersonal encounter, through dance. Subtle, the transitions from gaze to touch, from aggression to tenderness, from combat to the collective – a play as much on rituals as on ambiguity.

The choreographer Antonia Baehr is one of the three dancers in the piece. She stages a dynamic exchange full of agitation with and between her partners, Mirjam Junker and Pia Tilmann. DJane Emperatriz spins a live accompaniment from her record collection of contemporary experimental compositions by women. As an imaginary fourth character, Gertrude Stein contributes text passages from her opera *Four Saints in Three Acts*. Her text guides the movement, as do three other sentences from *Three Lives*, by which she sets the theme of the evening: “You look ridiculous if you dance. You look

ridiculous if you don’t dance. So you might as well dance.”

This theme is acted out on the plane of movements and the bodily. The piece’s uniqueness lies in its leveling out of – indeed its creation of a field of attention, a stage space for – an entire spectrum of feminine masculinity, or “butchness.” No stereotypes. Instead, differences and the peculiar. “Butchness” points to how fascinating it is when a gender is performed that transcends references to masculinity and femininity.

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This challenges thought patterns and normalizing expectations still largely mired in gender binarism. Should an impression of the ridiculous, the laughable arise, then it is, according to Stein, thoroughly huggable. Naming the morphology of the body and the erotics of its encounters “Normal Dance” is a criticism of conventional ideas, and it opens up, broadens the field of the normal. Gender-Visions and their precarious conditions, which always bring with them class positions and racializations, are Antonia Baehr’s stuff of inspiration in this piece. The ridiculous calls out, battles, challenges the Normal to a dance, only to gain a more dynamic thrust, when competition is replaced by fullness: “As much as anyone could desire.”

– Translated from German by William Wheeler