Book Review

_Dancing Age(ing): Rethinking Age(ing) in & through Improvisation Practice & Performance._

Susanne Martin
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Reviewed by Michelle Heffner Hayes

Susanne Martin’s new book demonstrates the possibilities that rise from the field of Practice as Research (PaR) in academic scholarship. Emerging from debates in the 1990s, research in this vein supplants the embattled but enduring dichotomy of theory versus practice in higher education. The textual component of her work accompanies a digital archive of performance, rehearsals, interviews, and stills accessible online. Martin outlines her PaR methodology for the study, which is then broken down into its constitutive elements: performative interviews with artists as improvisational duets in speech and movement, the design of performance scores for the interviews, the development of the improvisational practice format of _Solo Partnering_, and two live performances—the _Fountain of Youth_ (2013) and the _Fountain of Age_ (2015). Throughout the research, video documentation captured the elements of process as well as the prescribed research outcomes.

Using the media of text, performance, and video, Martin theorizes an “age critical dance practice” (22). She situates her analysis of age(ing) (the parentheses disrupt the casual reading and assumptions underlying this term) as a construct of difference within the practice of improvisation in contemporary dance, particularly in the generations that follow the 1960s in Europe and North America. Her research places the improvising body in dialogue with scholarship in critical dance and age studies to deconstruct normative, stereotypical associations with age(ing) in wider cultural discourses, but particularly within the world of professional dance.

Here her inquiry finds fertile ground. To be sure, the realm of dance performance, whether in companies or among “independent” artists “has focused on youthful physicality and, as such, takes part in an unquestioned marginalization of older bodies” (13). Age, or rather, the prevalence of youth, has been naturalized in professional dance within descriptions of and assumptions about aesthetics and virtuosity. As is the case with the concepts of gender, race, class, (dis)ability, and sexual identity, cultural representations of age(ing) reflect and construct ideologies that inscribe normative bodies and practices. Through an improvisation-based approach to contemporary dance and an analysis of the practices of artists who “include improvisation, experimentation, and openness to change into their approach to dance making” (20-21), Martin studies how one “can avoid reproducing the norms of age(ing), and instead can take part in producing alternate imaginations, concepts and practices regarding age(ing) in dance” (23).

Martin layers her critical investigation through the chapter organization of the book. As expected, the Introduction provides the context for the research, a description of the methodology, the location of this study within a scholarly dialogue composed of scholars and performers, and an overview of the structures of the book. Her first chapter, “A Dancer’s Perspective and Approach,” outlines the practices that foreground her research. Interestingly, Martin belongs to a generation of artists whose childhood education and professional preparation in dance featured improvisational practices from an early age. She traces her training through a lineage of artists and teachers and peers rather than technical styles or movements: “[I] avoid the categories Ausdruckstanz, modern dance, postmodern dance as well as a clear distinction between improvisers and choreographers” (37). In addition, her performance methodology is informed by years of performance with the “postdramatic” Theater M21, and cultivating a relationship of “reciprocity and complicity” (43) with the audience, “to make the process of improvisation more accessible and support the audience experience at an improvised performance” (45).

“Understanding Age(ing) in Age and Dance Studies,” the second chapter, explores six different definitions of age originally articulated by feminist age studies scholar Kathleen Woodward. Martin develops an “age autobiography,” which then becomes material for a performance monologue that “renders perceptions of age ambiguous not only for myself but for my audience” (63). The second half of this chapter provides a literature review of the field of age studies and explains how danced deconstructions of age have the capacity to critique the wider discourses of “social systems, norms, and identities” in a specific cultural context. Martin builds an argument for deconstruction beginning with Derrida, Butler, Bourdieu, and Foucault, and then moves to a feminist discussion of age(ing) from Beauvoir and Sontag. She connects these authors to contemporary age studies scholarship (Guillet, Haller, Schwaiger, and Woodward) and the discussion of age(ing) in dance studies. Martin distinguishes her analysis of contemporary dance
improvisation and critical age practice from other dance studies scholars like Claid and Nakajima. Throughout her discussion, Martin negates the narrative arc of “progress, peak, followed by decline.” Further, she rejects “continuous growth narratives,” because “[t]hey still create fixed attributions and a static hierarchy between different ages” (82).

While most professional dancers who perform set repertory “age out” by their mid-thirties, there are several examples of improvisational dance artists who maintain a lifelong practice. Martin attributes this capacity to the “processes and procedures” of improvisational performance, which can indeed lend insights to a consideration of age(ing). “That the situation and the body changes, and that it is impossible to hold on to what was, however perfect or satisfying, neither contradicts nor exalts improvisation” (83). Martin uses the discourses of improvisation to interrogate the scholarly literature surrounding subjectivity and self in phenomenology, citing work by dance improvisation scholars like Midgelow, Albright, Goldman, and Landgraf. Focused, as they are, on “practice-tool oriented discussions of improvisation” (86), and the negotiation of the constraints within a number of contexts, these analyses provide the foundation for the consideration of age(ing) among contemporary dance improvisation artists.

Chapter Three, “Improvising Age(ing)” accesses the data culled from the interviews and the development of the Solo Partnering project in Martin’s research. The author weaves commentary from six (seven, including herself) dance improvisation artists into a description of the strategies employed by these artists to sustain their practice. From the “macrostructures” of professional dance, that is, company hierarchies and support from funding agencies, presenters, and audiences, Martin observes a series of “microstructures” in improvisational dance. Based on the interviews, artists operate outside conventional company or even project-based funding models and festival circuits. They develop mixed economic models and amend their lifestyles to accommodate their artistic practice. Many of the artists connect regularly in intergenerational community contact improvisation jam sessions. From these microstructures, Martin identifies the ways in which improvisers negotiate the shifting physical constraints of their bodies through dialogue and reflexivity. The working process generated by Solo Partnering produces three improvisation-based tools for an age-critical practice: “1) Search for refinement and differentiation in perception and action, 2) Critique of one’s own presumptions and conventions, and 3) Acceptance and activation of one’s possibilities here and now” (116). The video examples that accompany the text in this section demonstrate how the engagement of these tools in the rehearsal process functions. The “prompts” change the movement decisions of the artist, capturing the moments when the PaR model reveals how the practice complicates, illuminates, or embodies critical theory.

“Performing Age(ing),” the fourth chapter, focuses on the “possibility of dance to contribute to a critical age(ing) discourse through purposefully and explicitly addressing age(ing) in performance” (123). Martin analyzes two categories of dance: works designed for older performers and works that critically engage the concept of age(ing) using their own bodies in performance. The divide here addresses first the hierarchy of choreographer and dancer, then the notion of a single work versus a continuous, sustained body of work. Martin explores the ways in which performances in the second category resist youthfulness in dance, reconcile with age and death, and collide with age norms (127). The description of these performances and the critical response to the performances resonate with earlier discussions of gender and age(ing), and cultural expectations of youthfulness in dance. They emphasize the ways in which the age(ing) body exceeds (in terms of its fleshiness, for example) or fails (shrinking muscles, aching joints) as a valued component of the performance, often using parody or humor to draw attention to the constructed dichotomy of youth and old age. Performers privilege vulnerability and the economy of selves, often invoking past performances along a continuum of a changing body.

Martin concludes the fourth chapter with a sustained examination of Performing Age(ing), a series of work begun in 2003, which culminated in the Fountain of Youth (2013) and the Fountain of Age (2015). She gleams from this developmental practice of age critical performance four key strategies: 1) Sliding through Time, 2) Embracing Disorientation, 3) Undoing Age Appropriateness, and 4) Inviting the Audience into Ambiguity (145). The ambiguity and multiplicity of temporality confounds the linear narrative of “progress, peak and decline,” a key theme of ageist discourses. Surrendering the control of orientation reminds us of the continuous negotiation of bodily and spatial change at every age, not only in a fearful fiction of “old age.” Transgressing the cultural norms supporting the notion of appropriate behavior in a parodic intimate living room environment reveals the comedic, yet painful aspects of “letting go” of these structures. Martin’s “hosting” role in performances blurs the line between audience and actor, but also invites the participants to actively, if awkwardly, engage in tasks that suggest different perspectives on age(ing). She thoughtfully and humorously ties the development of ideas in her practice and scholarship to the “research outcomes” of Performing Age(ing).

Martin’s Conclusion reprises the core questions underscoring her critical inquiry. She reflects on the methodology of PaR as a mode of knowledge production, and the place that her research occupies in the current scholarship on critical age and dance studies. The role of improvisation is key to the theoretical and practical structures of the investigation, and has implications for research in other disciplines, including improvisation studies. Meticulous and rich, the book incorporates theoretical density with practice-based insights. Martin provides representations of
improvisational practice and rethinking age(ing) across several modes of exploration. It is a gift for scholars, teachers, and practitioners of dance improvisation, and an important library addition for researchers in improvisation studies. I have no doubt that it will appear on any number of bibliographies for comprehensive exams. Like the improvisational scores Martin uses, the book can be approached from multiple perspectives. Each chapter features an introduction and a summary, which helps the reader locate specific discussions. Video clips animate the textual discussion, and offer a different foray through the material. The reader may enter and exit the material, and follow different paths and subjects by switching from text to video. Although no index is provided in the paperback version, the electronic version of the book allows for word searches to find authors or subjects. Perhaps most importantly, Martin’s work supports the wider acceptance of Practice as Research (PaR) in academic settings as a rigorous and comprehensive mode of critical inquiry and knowledge production.