

Minor Gestures: Chantal Akerman's *Un jour Pina a demandé...*

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Abstract

Drawing on Erin Manning's concept of the 'minor gesture', this article engages with the choreographic and filmic value of gestural hands. It considers Bausch's choreography as a gestural practice that intervenes into everyday comportment and habits to show or incite potential variation; and it traces how Akerman's filmic intervention into Bausch's work intensifies and alters (our readings of) this work in turn, enhancing what is there and adding new orientations to thematic pathways that it might indicate. Akerman's 1983 documentary *Un jour Pina a demandé...* includes many activities that involve hands, both on and off stage, as they are engaged in forming dance gestures, but also in smoking, putting on make-up, tying ties, performing gestures of tenderness or of sign language, and also of 'marking' movement sequences. Hand gestures, here, embrace both signification and functionality; yet even more importantly, Akerman's filming brings to the fore their tactile and social dimensions. This is less a matter of appropriating, but of sharing a choreographic concern for gestural hands, testifying to an aesthetic preoccupation with conduct that ultimately belongs to the commitment of Akerman and Bausch to what might be called an *ethics of gesture*, carried out across the media of dance and film.

Transposing Gilles Deleuze's and Félix Guattari's concept of the 'minor' to the gestural, Erin Manning writes: '[t]he minor gesture punctually reorients experience', and she continues: '[t]he event and the minor gesture are always in co-composition, the minor punctuating process, moving the welling event in new and divergent directions that alter the orientation of where the event might otherwise have settled'.¹ This article draws on Manning's concept of the minor gesture in a double sense. It associates its metaphorical resonance with the ways in which Pina Bausch and Chantal Akerman open up experience and events to 'variability';² and, more literally, it zooms in on Bausch and Akerman as artists who are concerned with the small, actual gestures both of choreographed dance

¹ Erin Manning, *The Minor Gesture* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2016), pp. 2–3.

² Ivi, p. 72. My use of the concept of the 'minor gesture' uncouples it from Manning's strong focus on neurodiversity.

and everyday life. It considers Bausch's choreography as a gestural practice that intervenes into everyday comportment and habits to show or incite potential variation;³ and it traces how Akerman's filmic intervention into Bausch's work intensifies and alters (our readings of) this work in turn, enhancing what is there and adding new orientations to thematic pathways that it might indicate.⁴ Akerman's 1983 documentary *Un jour Pina a demandé...* creates a sense of intimate yet respectful proximity to the dancers. This proximity rests not least on the filming of activities that involve hands, both on and off stage, as they are engaged in forming dance gestures, but also in smoking, putting on make-up, tying ties, performing gestures of tenderness or of sign language, and also of 'marking' movement sequences. Hand gestures, here, can be both functional and meaningful; yet even more importantly, Akerman's filming brings to the fore their tactile and social dimensions. This is less a matter of appropriating, but of sharing a choreographic concern for gestural hands, testifying to an aesthetic preoccupation with conduct that ultimately belongs to the commitment of Akerman and Bausch to what might be called an *ethics of gesture*, carried out across the media of dance and film.⁵

One of the most urgent questions, when exploring Akerman's documentary, relates to the vast discrepancy there must have been between the available and the ultimately chosen footage; and to the thought that must have gone into singling out what to include. Akerman and her team accompanied Bausch on tour from Wuppertal to Milan, Venice, and Avignon, recording run-throughs and performances of five pieces: *Komm tanz mit mir* (1977), *Kontakthof* (1978), *1980*, *Walzer* (1982), and *Nelken* (1983). All of these pieces are between about two and three and a half hours long. How did Akerman pick the passages that made it into her 57-minute documentary, how did she decide what to show and what not to show? We can only attempt to answer this question. What we see is that the filmmaker went for a collage of clips of performances, rehearsals, and backstage sequences that echoes Bausch's own collages of scenes in her performance works. These clips are juxtaposed or respond to each other across the length of the film in ways that go beyond the documentary in the strict sense, to bring about an insightful variation of Bausch's choreographies in the form of a new, co-authored piece of filmic dance theatre: *Un jour Pina a demandé...*

³ The gestural quality of Pina Bausch's choreographies has often been commented on, see, for instance, Inge Baxmann, 'Dance Theatre: Rebellion of the Body, Theatre of Images and an Inquiry into the Sense of the Senses', in *The Pina Bausch Sourcebook: The Making of Tanztheater*, ed. by Royd Climenhaga (Hoboken: Taylor & Francis, 2012), pp. 142–51.

⁴ While this article considers Akerman's specific ways of 'intervening' into Bausch's work, it is based on Douglas Rosenberg's definition of all 'screendance', which 'implies that the method of apprehension (the screen) modifies the activity it inscribes (dance)'. Douglas Rosenberg, *Screendance: Inscribing the Ephemeral Image* (Oxford: OUP, 2012), p. 3.

⁵ See Lucia Ruprecht, 'Introduction: Towards an Ethics of Gesture', *Performance Philosophy* 3.1 (2017), 4–22 <<https://www.performancephilosophy.org/journal/article/view/167/185>> [accessed January 2021].

Handling Touch

Among Akerman's chosen clips is the following: about twenty minutes into the film, we witness one of the most memorable stagings of tactile hands in Bausch's œuvre, shown during a performance at the Scala in Milan. It is part of *Kontakthof* and it draws out this piece's declared interest in (sites for) 'contact'. Dancer Nazareth Panadero, wearing a pink, flowy dress with lace inserts as if made for a doll, is surrounded by perhaps eight men, who touch and test her body with over-agitated but also business-like gestures. This is recorded in a medium shot, hardly allowing for an orientating scan of the entire group. Carrying out moves that are both childish and possessive, hands ruffle Panadero's hair, tickle or press the tip of her nose, pinch her cheek, massage her shoulders, stroke her belly, caress her temple, smack her bottom (fig. 1). The female dancer does not show any reaction, she remains passive and silent. The men let her down to the floor and pick her up again while her head and limbs hang loose. When she is on the floor, someone shakes the flesh on the inside of her upper arm, another one rubs his head on her stomach. The longer the routine continues, the more it speeds up, lasting approximately three increasingly unsettling minutes beyond the duration of the nostalgic love song 'Spring and Sunshine' (*Frühling und Sonnenschein*) which accompanies it. When the men finally let go of Panadero, she simply keeps on standing there, before she picks up her shoes and leaves. The men are joined by another woman in a pale blue dress, who leads them into one of Bausch's signature 'lines' or circles, in which dancers walk in linear procession behind each other while performing looped sequences of arm



Fig. 1: *Un jour Pina a demandé...* (Chantal Akerman, 1983). Screen capture.

movements and hand gestures. Now, the gestures are more subdued ones, resembling the typical displacement activities of social comportment: a little scratch of the neck, smoothing down one's jacket, a half-embarrassed smile across the shoulder; but also breathing out with puffed-up cheeks, as if in frowning, self-inflated commentary on the previous goings-on. The piece's other female dancers also join the line. *Kontakthof* ends with the entire cast walking in a large circle around the stage.

Kontakthof's 'doll scene' is the culmination of the piece's gestural leitmotiv of often problematic tenderness, which is performed in a number of hand-led choreographic sequences, and associated with the repeated use of the song 'Spring and Sunshine'.⁶ Apart from the long take of the climactic scene, however, *Un jour Pina a demandé...* does not show us any of these other sequences. Instead, Akerman contextualises the doll scene by regularly punctuating her film with short, isolated clips of couples who enact encounters in front of the green padded walls of the company's working space, the Wuppertal *Lichtburg*. In one of these clips, we see a couple practicing the idiosyncratic gestures of tenderness on each other. As the performers keep on repeating their gestural routine, they give us a chance to observe with attentiveness what they do, so that we recognize single moves and touches from the doll scene without being distracted by the speed and multiplicity of hands that make up its spectacular group setting.⁷ If that setting unfolds a disturbing emotional effect, the couple's rehearsal makes clear that it studies the form, not the dramatic impact, of touch. Akerman uses the analytical quality of this rehearsal to counter the affective blow of the performed version. Another one of Akerman's choices of footage works in similarly re-routing fashion. Showing one of the processional lines from *Walzer*, she makes us realise how this piece also takes up *Kontakthof*'s ambivalent hand gestures, now possibly in order to redeem them by way of the light-hearted, hip-swinging élan and the greater agency of the female dancers, who perform the routine of hair-ruffling and nose-pinching first on the men, then in the air while waltz-stepping away from them.

In addition, Akerman places *Kontakthof*'s doll scene in between two backstage sequences. The first sequence catches moments at various points of time before the beginning of a performance. It shows us dancers in calm, but also focused or expectant moods, resting, waiting, and smoking, in street attire; it shows them getting ready, applying makeup, rehearsing, already in costume, movement phrases by marking them with their hands. A dancer sits at a piano and plays a jazz piece, very different from the songs and musical excerpts that Bausch

⁶ See Raimund Hoghe, 'Into Myself — a Twig, a Wall: An Essay on Pina Bausch and her Theatre', in *The Pina Bausch Sourcebook*, pp. 62–73 (p. 67).

⁷ For a fuller analysis of the aesthetic of repetition in Bausch, see Gerald Siegmund, 'Rehearsing In-Difference: The Politics of Aesthetics in the Performances of Pina Bausch and Jérôme Bel', in *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Politics*, ed. by Rebekah J. Kowal, Randy Martin, and Gerald Siegmund (New York: Oxford University Press, 2017), pp. 182–97.

chooses for her performances. We hear muffled talk. Another dancer is tying his tie and smoothing his hair in front of a full-length mirror. A female performer quietly sings 'My Bonnie lies over the Ocean' while applying powder with a brush.⁸ The backstage sequence that succeeds the recording of *Kontakthof*'s final passages displays a different mood; quick changeovers during a performance indicate an alert atmosphere. We see a male dancer (Lutz Förster) first standing, apparently just having changed into a new outfit, then sitting in front of a makeshift mirror in dim light while two women and two men help him with the final touches of his makeup and clothes. The film cuts to Dominique Mercy in pin-stripe suit who refreshes the foundation on his face, using a powder puff to cover the sweat. Panadero, chewing gum in mouth, takes over the puff as soon as he is done. More dancers huddle in front of another mirror to check their faces. Loud voices intrude from the stage, mingling with whispered chatting in the wings. Hairspray is passed round, pins attached to buns, hands rubbed clean with tissues. Mechthild Großmann is having a smoke and sipping coffee. While we saw Mercy cross-legged against a wall, taking a drag in comfortable clothes in a moment of rest at the beginning of the first backstage sequence, he is now smoking again, but in more formal fashion, sitting in his buttoned-up suit on a chair, with a collected, slightly tense face.

By including the functional, everyday backstage moves of professional performers in her documentary, Akerman echoes Bausch's own principle of putting on stage and choreographing mundane comportment. Framed by the camera, quotidian hand moves thus become gestures, acquiring equal value as those we see in the clips from performances.⁹ Activating the interventionist potential of Manning's concept of the minor gesture, this becoming-gesture implies the creation by the filmmaker and the choreographer of conditions that allow for the 'variability' of the events or comportments that they work with.¹⁰ As in the scene of the couple in front of the green wall that shows us another version of the touching that we have witnessed before, it is in this variability that a self-reflective dimension arises. Akerman chooses and places her scenes so that they yield gestural commentary on each other. In the case of the backstage sequences, it is especially the passage with Förster being swiftly looked after by four people that reflects back on the doll performance. Like Panadero, Förster does not object to being handled by a group of colleagues. Yet he, of course, receives services that help him getting ready in haste. In addition, he is in control of what happens to him, reacting to one of the women's touches by telling her that she

⁸ This song is another element of *Kontakthof*, sung by the company sitting in a line of chairs parallel to the back of the stage, in front of the podium that is part of this piece's stage design; we do not see the scene in Akerman's documentary, however.

⁹ For the aesthetic of the ordinary gesture in film, see Lesley Stern, 'Ghosting: The Performance and Migration of Cinematic Gesture, Focusing on Hou Hsiao-Hsien's *Good Men, Good Women*', in *Migrations of Gesture*, ed. by Sally Ann Ness and Carrie Noland (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2008), pp. 185–216.

¹⁰ Manning, p. 72.

just applied a little too much makeup. By contrast, Panadero puts all her strength into remaining controlled enough not to react to what the men do to her. She invests energy into the maintenance of her passivity. This way, she prolongs rather than shortens her ordeal. Akerman's clips follow the distribution of masculine and feminine norms of behaviour that define large parts of Bausch's oeuvre. But, like Bausch herself, Akerman also diversifies gender performance, by directing the camera at a man to whom make-up is applied; while filming the doll scene at such length as to reveal the steadfast endurance of the female performer whose stamina outlasts the men's handling. If the functional manual activities of the backstage setting become gestures through the direction of Akerman's camera, the persistent reiteration of hand gestures in the passages that show deliberately staged behaviour leads us to perceive them in their functionality, rather than their signification. In this way, and closely echoing Bausch's own strategies, Akerman handles touch: valuing the ordinary hand moves of the performers as gestures in their own right, while taking apart extraordinary gestures by giving us enough time to perceive them as (dis)functional units of manual operability.

Guiding the Gaze, Taking by the Hand

Can the directing of the gaze be a gesture, in the sense of taking viewers by the hand to share a precious selection of impressions with them? Or of making them cover and uncover their eyes with their hands? In footage of a run-through of *Walzer* that is included towards the beginning of the documentary, we see dancer Héléna Pikon's head and bust in medium close-up. She is looking at something

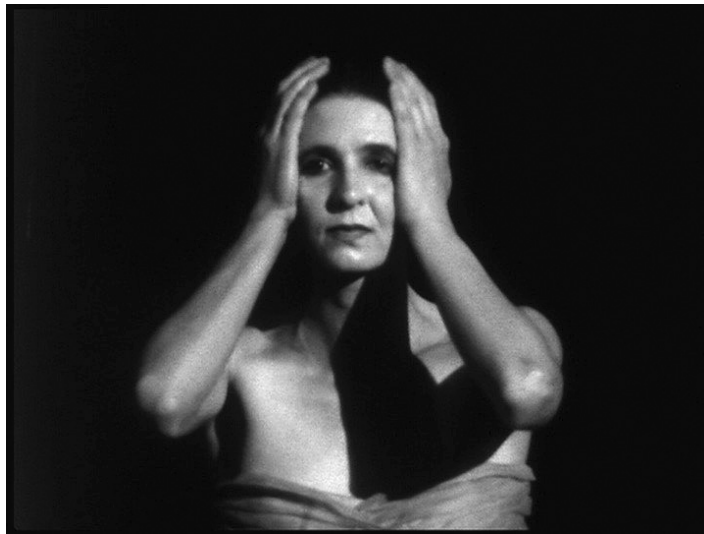


Fig. 2: *Un jour Pina a demandé...* (Chantal Akerman, 1983). Screen capture.

motionlessly, lifting her hands to her head and placing them right and left on her skull, in a take of about 90 seconds. The weight of her arms very slowly drags her hands and the skin on her temples down, so that her left eye begins to be slanted downwards, impeding her vision (fig. 2).¹¹ If we carry out the gesture of the woman by ourselves, we feel the warmth of our skull, covered by layers of hair, the pressure of our palms, the slight tension in the arms that are lifted while the shoulders are held down, and the pull on our skin as the hands ever so slowly descend along the temples. We also notice the diminution of our visual field with the increased pull at the corner of our eye. Our sight is being disfigured alongside the disfigurement of our face. Akerman points up a concern with sight, with what to watch or acknowledge and, by extension, with what to show, in one of the brief interviews of the film. We see her sitting on the floor underneath a window, saying to a woman who is placed towards the left-hand side of the frame, with her back to us (thus echoing our own position):

When I watched one of Pina's performances for the first time a couple of years ago — it was *Bandoneon* — I was overcome by an emotion I can't quite define. But it was very very strong and had something to do with happiness. And now, we've been following her for two weeks. We've been watching her as she works, we've seen rehearsals, performances, rehearsals, performances. And something else has really happened. There really have been moments during which I felt I had to defend myself from what was being expressed, moments in the performance when I had to close my eyes. And at the same time I don't understand why.¹²

One specific sequence of the documentary seems to re-create this experience. It is a passage from a performance of *Nelken* in Avignon, which is inserted shortly after Akerman's confession, and makes us want to close our eyes, and ears, in turn. This wish to defend ourselves is brought about by Akerman's framing, restricting our gaze to the events at the front of the stage, while omitting that which happens in the background. What we see are women and men in evening gowns on a row of chairs, leaning back and placing their weight on their forearms while pushing their pelvis up — as if 'jumping' with their hips — so that they can change the crossing of their legs while momentarily being in the air. While we see them first from behind, the performers grab their chairs several times to rearrange them. As opposed to the many long, stable takes of the documentary, the camera here rushes around with the dancers' actions. Performers are filmed from a low angle so that we get glimpses of white underpants, worn indiscriminately by all of them.

¹¹ The image of the woman recalls the beginning of *Kontakthof*, not included in Akerman's documentary, where the performers enact exactly the same gesture of placing their hands on their skulls, yet moving them down by sliding their hair away towards the back of their necks when presenting themselves to the audience. A slight gestural variation turns the determined self-exhibition of *Kontakthof* into *Walzer's* melancholic stare, set to Edith Piaf's song 'No, je ne regrette rien'.

¹² English subtitles, *Un jour Pina a demandé...* (Chantal Akerman, 1983).

They repeat their movements at a frantic pace, interspersing their leg-crossing with fast seesawing passages where they lean backwards and forwards on their chairs while executing a brief arm routine. There is intensity in the soundscape too: the music is from Franz Schubert's string quartet *Death and the Maiden*, overlaid with the increasingly urgent cries of a woman whom we do not see and who breathlessly shouts (in French), as far as we can understand her: 'This is impossible! What are you doing? No, no; yes! Stop! Don't do this', ending in a piercing scream, after which Akerman cuts to another backstage sequence. The particular concurrence of sonic and physical exertion, together with our ignorance of the full picture, might force many of us to imagine rape. If Akerman had opened the entire stage to our gaze, we would know that the scene plays out in front of two large blocks of cardboard boxes that are built by a group of male performers while the upset woman paces between them, commenting on their actions. Independent of its filming, the scene is still unsettling as the men do not respond to the woman's pleading. The violent imaginary is however held further at bay. Akerman does not offer us this reassurance.¹³

Yet again, in the backstage scenes this imagined violation of intimacy is set off against a space of safe privacy. Dancers are at ease changing in front of each other, and in front of the camera — note the filmmaker's medium close-up of a bare-breasted female dancer who is brushing her hair.¹⁴ Such scenes suggest that Akerman's film constitutes a document of friendship. Akerman and her team lived with the company for three months, and viewers are allowed to re-live this experience. She begins her documentary in the mode of familiarity, in the middle of a stage rehearsal, focusing on Bausch giving instructions to her dancers without informing us about time, place and title of the piece that was being rehearsed at that moment.¹⁵ The documentary ends with a brief snippet of an interview with

¹³ She also includes a similarly uneasy scene from *Komm tanz mit mir*, in which Jo Ann Endicott fails to convince a single man to dance with her and instead finds herself being encircled by a large number of men.

¹⁴ In its confidence and ease, this shot of the bare-breasted woman might be the most emancipatory one of the documentary, next to the shot at the beginning that shows Bausch herself in a loose vest, visibly not wearing a bra, while directing her dancers on an open-air stage through kind but firm gestural communication. Is it coincidental that Akerman chose to show Bausch in this outfit, given that the choreographer is often seen without a bra underneath a vest or T-shirt, and given that bras were less compulsory in 1980s Europe than they are now? In any case, these shots exude calm authority, especially when we juxtapose them with staged scenes such as *Kontakthof's* underwear-adjusting march, in which two women continuously fiddle around with the layers underneath their formal wear.

¹⁵ The lack of establishing shots makes orientation as to which of the pieces we are seeing at any one time difficult. It is also sometimes not immediately clear whether we are witnessing performances or rehearsals. To some extent, the subtitles that indicate titles of pieces are helpful here; but, Akerman certainly did not lay stress on conventional means of continuity and location, assuming a relaxed kind of acquaintanceship with Bausch's work. This is differently approached in Klaus Wildenhahn's documentary *What are Pina Bausch and her Dancers Doing in Wuppertal?*, also made in 1983, which begins with the presumably programmatic confession that the camera team (always) arrive too late when attempting to catch the liveness of rehearsal work. For a

Bausch in a dressing room. Akerman, who is behind the camera, asks: 'Pina, how do you see your future?' The sweet and perhaps conspiratorial smile with which Bausch looks at Akerman before answering that she hopes for love and strength indicates a little less of the professional distance of other interviews. Familiarity between filmmaker and choreographer is also an effect of the pervasiveness of medium shots, medium close-ups, and occasional close-ups, allowing us to gain much more proximity to the dancers as compared to watching them in a theatre. Full-body shots that include the feet are rare.¹⁶ Mostly, the camera is set at a low height, omitting the floor and catching performers from the hips upwards. While this angle is unusual in dance filming, which normally gives much attention to legwork, it epitomises Akerman's reading of Bausch as a gestural choreographer. The familial closeness and perspective of the shots enables us to access gestural detail, while simultaneously implying the director's presence. Giuliana Bruno writes: '[a] visitor to Akerman's world' — or to Akerman filming Pina's world — 'can even become sensitized to her own position in it. The placement of her camera sometimes indicates where the author stands in all senses, since it even includes the measure of her slight height'.¹⁷ As Bruno's move from anatomy ('slight height') to attitude ('where the author stands in all senses') indicates, Akerman's filmic aesthetic is also an ethics, demonstrating a dedication to choreographic conduct that echoes Bausch's own.¹⁸

Such conduct might be best represented by the minor gesture of taking someone by the hand. As Marina Nordera explores, the motor functions and the sensory and kinaesthetic qualities of this gesture gain symbolic value in dance.¹⁹

discussion of Wildenhahn's film, see Annemarie Matzke, 'Was tut Klaus Wildenhahn beim Filmen von Pina Bausch und ihren Tänzern in Wuppertal? Das *Making Of* als Ethnografie von Probenarbeit', in *Die andere Szene. Theaterarbeit und Theaterproben im Dokumentarfilm*, ed. by Stefanie Dieckmann (Berlin: Theater der Zeit, 2014), pp. 82–99. For a discussion of two recent documentaries by Lilo Mangelsdorf, Anne Linsel and Rainer Hoffmann, of stagings of *Kontakthof* with senior citizens and teenagers, see Christina Thurner, "Wirklich eines meiner Lieblingsstücke." Fokus auf Pina Bauschs *Kontakthof* mit Senioren und mit Teenagern', in Dieckmann, *Die andere Szene*, pp. 100–13.

¹⁶ When recording Mercy's demonstration of virtuosic feats of ballet technique in *Nelken*, the camera suddenly drops down to his feet, echoing the abruptness of the dancer's display of technical prowess.

¹⁷ Giuliana Bruno, 'In Memory of Chantal Akerman: Passages through Time and Space' in *Chantal Akerman: Afterlives*, ed. by Marion Schmid and Emma Wilson (Cambridge: Legenda, 2019), pp. 7–12 (p. 9).

¹⁸ If Akerman is able to pursue and depict Bausch's gesturality so well, this is because the latter is characteristic of her own work too, independent of the choreographer. Her *Toute une nuit* of 1982, shortly preceding *Un jour Pina a demandé...*, is a Bauschian collage of gestural scenes that even includes a dance of objects, in the frontal shot of a couple whose precipitous departure from a shaking bar table makes their beer glasses tip over to the right, once they have hastily left the frame, in analogy to the couple's flight. Also note that Charlotte Garson, in her blurb for the *Cabiers du cinema* DVD leaflet, calls *Toute une nuit* a ballet 'à la Pina Bausch'.

¹⁹ See Marina Nordera, 'Prendre par la main,' in *Histoires de gestes*, ed. by Marie Glon and Isabelle Launay (Paris: Actes Sud, 2012), pp. 165–79 (p. 167). Also note the title of Bausch's 1978 seminal adaptation of *Macbeth*, *He takes her by the hand and leads her into the castle, the others follow*,

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In footage of a rehearsal sequence of *Nelken*, Jan Minarik, Urs Kaufmann, and Förster lead Mercy by the hand. This is set to an instrumental version of the ‘he’ll take my hand’ line in George Gershwin’s song ‘The Man I Love’, which Förster enacted in sign language in two previous scenes.²⁰ It is a sequence in which the performers do not watch each other move, but make each other move, through gestural intervention. In her documentary, Akerman likewise does not merely record the choreographer’s work, but intervenes in it, by her choices of what she shows, and how she shows it; sometimes appeasing its afflictions, sometimes drawing out their urgency. Like a friend, the film takes Bausch and her dancers ‘by the hand’, as it were, leading them towards new constellations.

which marks the choreographer’s move to her rehearsal method of asking questions; see Gabriele Klein, *Pina Bausch’s Dance Theater: Company, Artistic Practices and Reception* (Bielefeld: transcript, 2020), p. 47.

²⁰ For a queer reading of these scenes, see Eike Wittrock, ‘Pina Bausch backstage, oder: Tanztheater von hinten’, in *Staging Gender – Reflexionen aus Theorie und Praxis der performativen Künste*, ed. by Irene Lehmann, Katharina Rost, and Rainer Simon (Bielefeld: transcript, 2019), pp. 81–102 (pp. 95–99).