Routledge Research in Aesthetics

A SOMAESTHETICS OF PERFORMATIVE BEAUTY

TANGOING DESIRE AND NOSTALGIA

Falk Heinrich

Falk Heinrich establishes a new theory of aesthetic experience that shifts focus from distanced contemplation to performative process based on his experience in tango dancing. From a somaesthetic perspective, the book elucidates that perceived action and enacted perception are one and the same.

—Professor Tanehisa Otabe (The University of Tokyo)

Based on his own experiences while dancing Argentine tango, Falk Heinrich has managed to identify a new concept of beauty that emerges in the movements of dancers. His multifaceted interpretation of this performative beauty, which has a general perspective, is highly original and will enchant the readers.

—Dr. Else Marie Bukdahl, former rector of
Royal Danish Academy of Fine Arts

A Somaesthetics of Performative Beauty

This book develops an original theory of performative beauty. Philosophical aesthetics has largely neglected one's own actions as potential experiences of the beautiful. Throughout the book, the author uses his own experiences of Argentine tango as a case study; one important incentive for social dancing is to have pleasurable and beautiful experiences.

This book begins by investigating the methodological reasons why beauty in modernity has been seen to result only from contemplating external objects. It then builds a theory of performative beauty that incorporates findings from new phenomenology, neuroaesthetics, enactivism, and somaesthetics and that reassesses existing inquiries into beauty. The result is an account that identifies kinaesthetic awareness as the point of emergence of both theory and practice, of creation (*poiesis*) and perception (*aisthesis*), and of moving (agency) and being moved (reception). Performative beauty is the pleasure of being moved by the dance, where the dancer feels like both a creative improvisor and an integrated part of the activity itself.

A Somaesthetics of Performative Beauty—Tangoing Desire and Nostalgia will appeal to scholars and advanced students working in aesthetics, dance studies, performance studies, and related fields of artistic research.

Falk Heinrich is a professor of participatory aesthetics and artistic research at Aalborg University, Denmark. Before joining academia, he worked as a theatre actor and director and installation artist. He studied dramaturgy and wrote his PhD on interactive digital installation art. He is the editor of *The Journal of Somaesthetics*.

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A Somaesthetics of Performative Beauty

Tangoing Desire and Nostalgia

Falk Heinrich

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For all dancing beings

Contents

1 Preface and introduction

Figure 1.1 Tango dancers. Photograph by Marc Honoré.

The beautiful will never be a well-defined concept. Rather, it must be seen as a question never to be fully answered but always to be pursued, investigated, and experienced. It is true: beauty happens. Looking for it should certainly increase the chances of the beautiful happening. I sometimes experience the beautiful while dancing—to be precise, while dancing Argentine tango. Argentine tango is a social dance in which amateurs dance for their own pleasure, at least today. Writing this book was part of my investigation into beautiful experiences of moving to music together with a dance partner. I call this instantiation of the beautiful *performative beauty*; it is experienced while performing movement, and it nurtures movements.

My beautiful experiences with Argentine tango serve only as an exemplary case, however—only one performative and somatic practice

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that makes my investigations of the concept of performative beauty concrete and tangibly real. My findings and propositions can be applied to other activities that somatically engage individuals on different levels and to different degrees. These might be other forms of dance, sports, participatory art, or social games, all activities that create or occur in a well-defined space with either rules or mutual agreements and often also a unique semiotic field (symbols, metaphors, distinct objects, and spaces) within which these activities can be experienced as meaningful. On an even more general level, my elaborations are intended to contribute to the understanding of all those experiences of the beautiful in which the experiencing subject is the performing or acting element. This entails many activities, such as walking in nature, swimming in the ocean, and practicing yoga, but also everyday practices, such as making food or painting a wall, depending on the subject's inclinations and motivational attitude. These activities form part of recent advances in everyday aesthetics, an investigatory field that looks at aesthetic features of everyday objects as well as everyday activities. The latter are not very developed or accepted by the academic community due to the lack of an object. "The difficulty of accounting for the aesthetics involved in these activities from the participants' perspective is the same difficulty facing ambient aesthetics: the lack of clear delineation of object-hood of aesthetic experience" (Saito, 2019, n.p.). My investigation should be seen as a contribution to making one's own activities not only aesthetically perceivable—they have always been—but also part of the subject matter of philosophical aesthetics.

The exemplarity of my exploration does not mean that my findings are readily valid and applicable to activities other than Argentine tango. Any application necessitates modifications and concretisations because experiences of practice are always particular, situated, and dependent on the type and characteristics of that activity. Analytical investigations of one's own activity inevitably mean being involved in the practical side of it, too. One's own practice is the only available empirical field and object of investigation. On the other hand, theoretical investigations also shape one's practice. The mutual influence is the pragmatist and somaesthetic credo. Hence, my academic ambition is twofold; on the one hand, I want to investigate beautiful experiences of dancing Argentine tango as one particular activity, and on the other hand, I want to elaborate on a notion of the beautiful relevant to somatic practices in general. I have more to say about this in Chapter 3 that discusses the methodological peculiarities of my investigation.

In short, the addressees of this book are not only addicted tango dancers and scholars of dance but also aestheticians curious about beautiful experiences of one's own actions. My notion of performative beauty has implications for philosophical aesthetics and somatic practices alike.

1.1 The blind spot of aesthetics

Not surprisingly, there are many academic and non-academic books on movement and dance, its different forms, its histories, genealogies, and cultural contexts, its musicality, and its aesthetics. However, to my knowledge, there is no academic investigation of the beautiful focused on the experience of social dancing. Generally, dance has not been in the spotlight in the academic elaboration of the beautiful. Philosophical aesthetics has focused on humans, natural objects or landscapes, art, and currently, everyday design objects. In art, visual and sculptural art have mainly served as examples, not dance, music, or performance art. The beauty of nature is seen and pondered in selected or framed objects that have been transformed into representational images of it—for instance, as *still life* or picturesque landscape paintings. Humans are judged according to their physiognomic attractiveness as incitements for sex, procreation, and social success; this approach to beauty as an evolutionary benefit can be found as early as Plato, and it has evolved into evolutionary aesthetics (e.g. Etcoff, 2000; Grammer et al., 2003). The human appearance has also been considered a token of morality (e.g. Hutcheson, 1726; Kant, 2000). Especially in fiction and art, the beautiful appearance of (mostly female) humans has been rendered as transcendent and elevated to saintliness (e.g. in Goethe's *Wilhelm Meister* (1795) or Bernini's baroque sculpture *The Ecstasy of Saint Teresa* (1652)).

In aesthetics, the mere judgement of something as beautiful seems to bring movement and action to a halt. Even when assessing the gracious movements of dancers, the movements are transformed and reduced to either basic lines on a canvas or sculptural representations (see e.g. Hogarth, 1753) or, as in the case of Isadora Duncan, hypostasised into the spiritual and moral idea of human goodness (Daly, 1994). It is difficult to capture and settle on observations of fluctuating movements. We are brought up to aesthetically judge stable objects or conceptually stabilised aspects of objects, such as the face or figure of a human being. Gracious and elegant movements are simply seen as supporting aspects.

There are no investigations of the aesthetics of one's own movements and actions or their potential for beautiful experiences. This is rather surprising since quotidian language allows us to have beautiful moments of dancing, walking, biking, wind surfing, skiing, and so on. I will return to this in my introductory chapter. Inspired by Stendhal, this book intends the impossible:

> [I]t takes the one hundred men in ten million who understand beauty, which isn't imitation or an improvement on the beautiful as already understood by the common herd, twenty or thirty years to convince the twenty thousand next most sensitive souls after their own that this new beauty is truly beautiful.
>
> (Stendhal, 1995, p. 386)

1.2 Objectives and objectivisation

In this book, I want to explore these moments. I have two overall objectives. One, as already stated, is to tear open the investigatory field of aesthetics and get rid of some of the prejudices and self-limitations firmly rooted in the Western tradition of (philosophical) aesthetics. This is very much a discussion of methodological heritage, which I discuss in depth in Chapter 3, entitled *Methodological dances*. But my concern is not only with aesthetics as an academic discipline. To state it bluntly, my studies are also fuelled by my ambition to counteract the shallow notion of the beautiful in our consumeristic commodity culture. The beauty industries in this media-saturated culture are transforming human beings, first, into visual objects to be looked at and appreciated (or despised and ridiculed), and second, into commodities in the labour market. It is well known that women perceived as beautiful get better jobs, have higher salaries than others, and are more trusted. The beauty of our outer forms has an immense value for most of us. Our appearances have social significance. This value is sustained by immense beauty industries that almost nobody can escape.

Evidently, the longing for a beautiful appearance is as old as humans walking the earth, and one would be a fool not to take pleasure in the appearance of a beautiful human or, conversely, in appreciative looks and comments from others (for those who actually receive them). This is simply a part of the sociobiological dimension of human life. In my opinion, however, this dimension has developed into a monstrous industry that is based on and furthers the objectivisation and commodification of the human being. Our current aesthetic values are tied to the perception, evaluation, and often also possession of objects, be they artworks, design artefacts such as houses and their interiors, cars, animals, or even our objectivised selves. Our own beauty is dependent on the evaluative judgements of others. When I look in the mirror, I am adopting the eyes of the other, of not-me, and I judge myself as another. This is one aspect of the Lacanian lesson.

My criticism is that our experiences of the beautiful today are exclusively tied to the beauty of objects, thus excluding the experience of our own actions. One reason for our ecological crises today is the production of gigantic numbers of products of which fast consumption yields only momentary satisfaction. Statistics have shown that apparel is used only seven to eight times on average in the Western world.[1] Here, aesthetic promises of pleasure and sensory gratification play an important promotional role. The invention and advertisement of the experience economy can be said to have shifted the focus from the consumption of material goods to the consumption of experiences. Experiences are always embodied and position the experiencer at the centre. Aesthetic stimuli play an important part in the marketing of experiences. The tourism industry,

for instance, promises beauty in the perfect harmony between pristine nature and the human consumer, paradoxically a setting often framed by sensuous stimuli of luxury. We have all seen the beautiful images of exotic nature alongside comfortable hotel rooms that are affordable even for middle-class people. There are not many enclaves of unspoiled nature left, yet there are many hotels and cheap flights, both of which contribute to the environmental crisis. Of course, our experience culture is brought about by a complicated mash of reasons and motivations, but it has aesthetic dimensions that can be used either for boosting consumerism or for opening up alternative, deeper ways of experiencing the sensory richness of earthly life. Argentine tango is no exemption; it also contains both aspects. On the one hand, tango is a part of the experience culture and economy; on the other hand, practicing tango can harbour deep and transformative experiences—and beauty.

Philosophical aesthetics has played the innocent role of the passive, non-interfering observer of the aesthetic dimension of objects and of the human faculty of sensory cognition. This seemingly harmless role of the observer has also sustained and propelled the development of the aesthetic consumption of objects. The foundational paradigm of Western epistemology is that the mind observes by creating a distinction, for example, between the observer and the observed—the subject and the object. An object has recognisable and communicable features: this yellow flower that belongs to the species of roses; this chair that belongs to the category of objects to sit on. Observation is also the foundational paradigm of aesthetics, including the recognition of beauty. Even when Kant claims that aesthetic perception is based not on concepts but on an indeterminate understanding sustained by the productive imagination, the aesthetic human is still an observer of something. Objects are beautiful: this rose, whether painted or materially present; this landscape, whether shown in a photo, a painting, or right there in front of us. An observation operates by drawing a line between what is recognised and what is not. One cannot simultaneously observe an artwork hanging on the wall of a museum and one's own observational act. One must choose, and normally one chooses the painting on the wall and not one's own observation. Of course, this makes sense in everyday life, where one is dependent on the registration and recognition of the surrounding space. Furthermore, philosophical aesthetics discriminates between action (performing, creating, practicing, and producing) and contemplation (perception and reflection), valuing the latter as epistemological virtues and rejecting the former because they belong to the realm of production and work. Practice-based research and knowledge have, however, recently gained more prominence within philosophical aesthetics.

Thus, our aesthetic tradition values objects and events that can be observed and contemplated from a distance at the expense of one's own

actions, which can only be experienced from the inside and are thus private and utterly subjective. In fact, they are considered far too subjective to be the subject of an academic investigation. But academic observations cannot be neutral; they contain values—for example, the value of generalisation. The academic community can only accept subjective experiences as objects of analysis by elevating them to generalised forms and operations. For instance, neurological investigations of aesthetic taste and experience seem valid because they investigate neuronal activations that are considered the same for every human being. Here, the focus is not on the aesthetic content of perception but rather on physiological operations. Works of art, the traditional examples of aesthetics, are intrinsically particular, yet they are objectifiable because they are considered the same for everybody and because they are often interpreted as general comments on something (e.g. the human condition, political and societal issues, the beauty of nature, or faith in Christ).

A human subject can also observe itself. In that case, the subject changes into an object to be sensed and examined, but the observation loses its academic validity because it cannot be generalised. This is the academic difficulty with the beautiful. Since the beginnings of philosophical aesthetics in the eighteenth century, aesthetic judgements have been taken as profoundly subjective while simultaneously implying validity for everybody. According to Hume, the validity of the beauty of a work of art often emerges over time. How can a philosophical investigation of the human capacity to perceive aesthetically not depend on observations of one's own perception? This is the vicious circle of the academic analysis of aesthetic experience that Mandoki (2007) writes about. It is subjective and only recognisable through introspection, yet it must somehow be objectivised to be theoretically available, which is often done by observing or by observing the observation of the aesthetic attributes of an object that is perceived in aesthetic experiences. This is not possible for the aesthetic perception of my own actions because there is no valid (i.e. identical for everyone) object on which the experience of the beautiful can be anchored. The objectivisation of one's own actions is a serious theoretical problem that my investigation must deal with; I do this in Chapter 3, *Methodological dances*, and Chapter 6, *Eros and objectivisation*.

The aforementioned account entails my assertion that *aesthesis* is a human faculty of sensing the world by positioning oneself as an integrated part of it. The Western tradition of aesthetic observation primarily focuses on the aesthetic perception of distinct parts of the world (mostly art) and not of the subject acting in and as part of the world. However, there is also an aesthetic of one's own actions. Sometimes, we do perceive and judge our own actions aesthetically. Some aestheticians have written about this (e.g. Dewey, 1980; Mandoki, 2007; Montero, 2016; Shusterman, 1999), but none have specifically elaborated on beautiful experiences of one's own actions. A focus on aesthetic experiences of

actions would be an alternative to the Western, capitalistic focus on objects and commodities. An acknowledgement of one's own actions as a valid aesthetic focus would emphasise *aesthesis* as an integrated part of actions. Action would then be an additional source of aesthetic pleasure and transformation.

Adopting an aesthetic approach to one's own action changes not only the perception of the action but the action itself. Even if an action's objective remains the same, for instance, peeling potatoes or stirring tea, the performance of the action changes in terms of tempo and rhythm, energy, and so on. In principle, every action can be experienced aesthetically. However, humans have created distinct forms and arenas for this kind of experience. There exist all kinds of somatic practices, such as yoga, tai chi, martial arts, dance, and sports—I have already mentioned them. All of these practices should not only be understood as physical training to improve or maintain the status quo of bodily capabilities. They also exercise an aesthetic awareness of our situated living bodies, thereby altering the perceived quality of the action. I am not solely talking about a spatial or physical change but also about a change in our somatic relationships with our environments. For me, social dancing is such a somatic exercise. I happen to dance Argentine tango, which is why this practice is the case for my investigation.

1.3 Tango, a social dance

Argentine tango is a social couple dance that is danced at *milongas* (tango balls) and *practicas* (where dancers meet to practice together). It is taught all over the world. The *milonga* gives the participants the opportunity to dance with several people. There are moral codices that regulate behaviour and secure the dancers' integrity on many levels. The dance is sensual (like all dances), even erotic, but generally not experienced by dancers as sexual. Argentine tango establishes an extra-daily arena of movements, comportments, and personal meetings. The dance's technique specifies an extraordinary way of moving and relating to others. Its distinct body and movement techniques divide the body into two halves. The dancers secure their connection through a stable embrace; the fronts of their upper bodies (their hearts) are always in a palpable spatial relationship to each other, resulting in relatively stable upper parts moving together on the same horizontal level. The lower parts, the hips and legs, move more freely: back and forth, away from, towards, and between each other. This technique produces the image of two persons melted together yet expressing their individual passions and personalities through the movements of the lower body. Tango also builds this extra-daily arena through its music, which has characteristic features in terms of rhythm, sound, composition, and lyrics. The Appendix presents them in more detail.

Argentine tango is based on two distinct roles, traditionally the male and female roles. The male's role is to lead, which includes the initiation of steps and combinations in relation to the surrounding space and the other couples on the dance floor. The female role, the role of the follower, transforms the impulses introduced by the leader into steps and movements. Importantly, both react to each other. I find that the terms "leader" and "follower" denote a bifurcation into an active role and a passive role that no longer describes the reality of dancing Argentine tango today. Throughout this book, I will call the leader the "proposer" and the follower the "interpreter." The proposer proposes steps and moves that the interpreter may accept and initiate. I will write a bit more later about problems and challenges concerning gender.

Tango is a cultural activity that selects and boosts some aspects of life at the expense of others. For instance, the meeting and interaction between the dancers are exclusively somatic, without any words. There are no objects to be handled, and while dancing, one does not eat or drink, and so on. The tango movements are limited, and some are enhanced. Tango, like any other social dance, implies a distinction between everyday life and dancing. It is considered a leisure activity, except for the professional dancers travelling the world as teachers and performers. Structurally, social dancing can be approached through Turner's (1982) concept of liminoid activity with ritualistic features.[2] Van Gennep establishes the threefold structure of ritual, which includes a pre-liminal phase, a liminal phase, and a post-liminal phase. He coins the term *liminality*, which implies a threshold to another state of being: the *limen* (Schechner, 2003, 2006).[3] Nonetheless, tango creates a global and local community by establishing a fairly precise social and performative framework for its activity. The activity entails a form of intimacy that thrives outside permanent relational structures because tango establishes transient but nevertheless intimate encounters. Törnqvist quotes Mjöbjerg to characterise Argentine tango: "This sociality is characterised by feelings of *oceanic unity* of being boundary-less in relation to self and to other; a *mutual orientation* of the interpersonal unit; experiences of being in a *continuous presence* and *exclusivity* (Mjöberg, 2011: 178)" (Törnqvist, 2018, p. 360).

Tango also entails several transformative dimensions. Dancing trains, among other things, balance, somatic awareness and control, performative connections to the dance partner, kinaesthetic understanding, empathy, and emotional balancing. Tango is also used in therapy and rehabilitation processes for assistance on both the physical and psychic levels.

Argentine tango is performative but not essentially a stage performance. It is performative because dancing has an immediate effect in that it establishes direct, energetic relationships between dance partners, dancing couples, and dancers and onlookers. Dancing creates a direct

"feedback loop" (Fischer-Lichte, 2008), and tango creates "actuals," to use Kaprow's term (Kaprow, 1965; Schechner, 2003). This means that tango dancing does not aim to produce representations. It does not refer to anything other than itself, although it can be seen as a metaphor for other aspects of personal and social life. Moreover, dancers and onlookers might have associations, memories, and feelings, but these are intrinsic parts of the movement. The dancers are (normally) dancing as themselves, not fictive figures. However, in our conception, tango also caters to something fictitious and almost theatrical. Tango apparel and shoes are often inspired by 1920s urban style, signalling charming, perky, and provocative men and women who know how to enjoy nightlife without being cheap. The lyrics tell stories from past eras and the dark side of glamourous city life—stories of poverty, love, jealousy, alcohol, social advancement, and ruin. Argentine tango is syncretic. It has incorporated and still draws on different dance styles, historic elements, and contemporary social values into a characteristic whole, thereby transforming it further into a global, significant form that allows dancers all over the world to participate in *milongas* and *practicas*.

Tango can be characterised as a performative "playground" (Huizinga, 1949) that gives us the possibility to play with suppressed or otherwise undeveloped aspects of our personalities. The tango playground allows dancers to liberate themselves—or escape—from their everyday social roles as employees, leaders, workers, husbands, mothers, and so on. At *milongas,* they are only dancers, deprived almost entirely of their personal histories or social statuses. Some dancers almost build up quasi-fictitious roles by using ritualistic clothes and shoes and by adopting the socio-behavioural norms of tango. This must be seen as a means of depersonalising the dancer. For instance, a timid person (dancing the role of the proposer (leader)) is granted the possibility of inviting an unknown stranger to dance (otherwise, they would not get a single dance during the entire evening). Traditionally, the interpreter had to wait until a proposer invited her to dance; this resulted in "wall flower" (Savigliano, 2010) women standing along the walls and observing the dancers while waiting for an invitation. Today, this gender difference is no longer absolute; followers can invite others to dance the role of the proposer, especially in smaller local communities. Today, some men take the opportunity to play with female qualities when dancing the role of the interpreter (follower).

This is a very short and rudimentary introduction to the main aspects of Argentine tango. It sketches a field or arena for action and being within which beautiful experiences might transpire.

1.4 Tango as ameliorative somatic practice

Kant claims that the notion of the beautiful connotes a positive, live-affirming experience. It is the feeling of being safe and relaxed, of being

at home and feeling oneself as an integrated part of a bigger whole, be it life proper or a concrete situation (Sartwell, 2006). Hence, the beautiful also expresses an ameliorative desire. To be able to recognise, experience, or even create the beautiful is an objective with transformative potential. Much eighteenth-century philosophical aesthetics dealt with the beautiful as its central notion. Its credo was the recognition and refinement of our aesthetic sensibility or taste to educate and liberate the human being from ideological straitjackets (I will come back to this in Chapter 4). Aesthetics as a means of cultivating the self has received renewed attention from the twentieth century up to today. The philosopher Santayana, in *The Sense of Beauty* (1955), sees the delight of beauty as a route towards perfection (very much inspired by Plato's writings about eros and beauty (*kalós*)). The pragmatist Dewey, in *Art as Experience* (1980), claims that aesthetic experience is an integrated and ameliorative part of life. In the second part of that century, Foucault, in *History of Sexuality*, identifies the aesthetics of existence as the foundation for ethical-aesthetic self-stylisation.[4] Shusterman's approach to somaesthetics favours the idea of somatic amelioration by integrating body and mind in theory and somatic practice. For these philosophers, aesthetics is not only a theoretical field but very much a sensibility towards life that creates somatic and transformative interfaces between thoughts and bodily being and acting. These interfaces are seen as the locus of the care of the self, the real purpose of aesthetics. I see my book as part of this ambition and tradition.

Argentine tango has many facets, purposes, and benefits, one of which is a somatic practice. The somatic "concerns the lived, sentient, purposive body rather than merely a physical body" (Shusterman, n.d.). Tango exercises not only individual bodily skills, such as equilibrium, sense of rhythm, and coordination of the limbs, but also awareness of one's own bodily movements in relation to others. Seen from a learner's and practitioner's perspective, Argentine tango is not an excessive activity that "frees" the body and its drives from incorporated mental and social control (as it has been characterised in criticisms by moralistic writers, especially at the beginning of the twentieth century (Chasteen, 2004; Knowles, 2009)). Tango exercises awareness, control, and new bodily and mental movement patterns. This is hard work. Only dancers who have learned and incorporated (some of) the movement techniques of tango are able to submit to the dance and let the body dance without cognitive management, which, as I will show, is both a prerequisite and an effect of beautiful experiences.

Tango has also been used in therapeutic contexts, for instance, as a supplement in the treatment of cancer, Parkinson's disease, and dementia, or in couples therapy. Here, a theory of performative beauty could be used to support and direct patients' and clients' sensory experiences

of their own actions as a means of self-acceptance and well-being. I see these possible applications of aesthetic knowledge in various fields as an important part of aesthetic research.

My notion of performative beauty indicates first of all a shift in perspective within aesthetics. As mentioned, my notion is deeply rooted in philosophical traditions but takes as a starting point and aim our somatic experiences. It can only be fully investigated by the practitioner as an oscillation between and integration of somatic practice and theoretical reflection. Here, somatic awareness is the seed and integrative means of both practice and *theoria*. Awareness appears to be a simple task: it is, and at the same time, it is not. My approach could be rejected as not academic—and surely not scientific—because it takes my own subjective experience of dancing as an important empirical base. For the investigation of performative beauty, however, this cannot be otherwise. The danger of solipsism and missing validity can only be counteracted by a methodical dialogue with existing theories and expositions of the notion and experience of the beautiful. I have attempted this with this book and my own practice.

1.5 Criticism

So far, my preface could be read as if the only purpose of Argentine tango is to yield beautiful experiences. This, of course, is not the case. Tango as a historic, social, and cultural phenomenon is complex and filled with paradoxes and incompatibilities. I will mention some of them. Dancing tango is fuelled by many purposes, which are mainly social and very private but also economic. Savigliano (1995) shows that Argentine tango is driven by exotism and erotism, two dimensions of the experience economy and a lingering colonialism with political connotations. Argentine tango is also a local and global business. It is one major driver of Buenos Aires' tourism industry (Kanai, 2014), including hotels, restaurants, tango balls, tango courses, and the tango fashion industry. Most amateur dancers own several pairs of dance shoes and often special trousers for men and gowns for women. There are tango festivals all over the world that attract dancers and fuel the tourist industry.

Thus, I do not consider Argentine tango an arena of purposelessness that escapes the experience economy and consumer culture. Nevertheless, I argue that at least the aesthetic dimensions of tangoing necessitate and constitute a realm of purposelessness. After all, tango is based on the idea of an uninhibited space and time, where everyday hardship is alleviated by being commented upon (by tango lyrics), reflected, and most of all, danced. In short, tango can be seen as a space-time of redemption that contains an aspect of—or at least ambition for—freedom (whatever that might entail). Furthermore, Kantian aesthetic purposiveness

without purpose is situated at a cognitive, epistemological level. In modernity, however, cultural and social activities such as social dance can be said to be purposive without specific purposes because they create a space for experimentation on a sensorimotor and thus also on an epistemological level.

Another common criticism of tango is the gender-biased attribution of roles. Traditionally, there is a leader, typically the man, who leads by initiating moves, directions, and qualities. And there is the follower, typically the woman, who engenders the concrete moves and their qualities. The man is invited by actively making eye contact with the chosen woman, who responds with a nod (*cabeceo*) or avoids the man's glance. It can be disappointing and negatively reinforcing to be at a tango ball (*milonga*) and not get a single dance during the evening. These traditional roles seem to reiterate and confirm the image of the active, inventive male and the passive, surrendering, and obedient female. This antiquated, unjust power relation seems potentiated by the fact that tango thrives on exotism, thereby reinforcing colonial structures (see, for instance, Savigliano, 1995).

The question is whether we should stop dancing Argentine tango because of these ethical questions and shortcomings. Should a woman stop indulging in dancing the interpreter's (follower's) role because it automatically enforces a distinct gender image? Or should we, through dancing, support developments that might rectify these inadequacies? We must comprehend that tango is a performative playground. Dancing is an ongoing improvisation with movement and with a specific cultural form that enables dancing in the first place. The form of any dance is always in flux and modified by the dancers and their cultures, ethical standings, and visions. In my view, there are no intrinsic, ethically problematic features inerasably embedded in this dance. As tango changes, its roles and techniques change. The tango playground also allows for experimentation and possible enjoyment of different roles and other structural traits.

Today, the gender-biased, functional division is questioned. Not only do women often dance together, but mixed couples also switch roles and learn both parts. This contributes to a better understanding of the experiential differences between the two roles. Dancers increasingly modify the gender-based characteristics of their roles. The follower can become an interpreter by actively interpreting and shaping the effectuation of the received impulses, and the interpreter does not solely execute learned patterns. In addition, some interpreters initiate figures by transforming the impulses into new impulses for the proposer (leader) to follow. The discussion of and demand for equal gender roles are transforming Argentine tango, making it more differentiated for those who are willing to transform it. On the other hand, the historic and perhaps fictitious bifurcation

of the two roles is also what attracts many dancers. Surely, there are many reasons why this gender differentiation might be interesting; for some, it might be playful experimentation, and it could help others gain or regain the ability to respectfully lead or to be able to indulge in the dancing by accepting leadership (independent of biological sex). For me, tango is a playground for dedication and experimentation that sometimes elicits beautiful experiences.

Argentine tango is an improvised dance. This does not mean that the dancers invent steps and figures on the fly but that they choose and modify learned dance elements within a concrete context established by the music and the other dancers on the floor. Improvisations are intrinsically interactive. I will show that the ambiguity of improvisation plays an essential part in beautiful experiences of dancing.

Most importantly, by investigating the beautiful dimension of dancing tango, I am not automatically accepting or even praising attributes that are ethically reprehensible. Likewise, I do not want to claim that the recognition of the beautiful will rectify the questionable traits of tango, at least not in a direct way. Recognising the unjust aspects of tango requires historical and sociocultural knowledge; changing them requires dancing. Not only is the notion of the beautiful a product of a distinct culture (namely, Western culture (Mandoki, 2007)), but what is seen and experienced as beautiful and valuable is also dependent on culture and on social groups within a culture. Thus, it can be argued that judgements of taste and beauty are inherently conservative. But to ponder the notion of the beautiful and to actively prepare by means of practice for occasions of the beautiful to happen are not conservative. I claim that personal, practical, and conceptual explorations of tango and an openness towards the beautiful dimension of dancing (or any other somatic activity) are profoundly enjoyable and pleasurably transformative. That is why I see the beautiful as a question that can never be answered but must be investigated to be experienced.

1.6 Structure

The book is made up of a preface, six chapters, and an appendix. Each chapter is divided into three or four subchapters. The chapters develop a novel theory of aesthetics, focusing on the performative aspects of the beautiful. The Appendix introduces Argentine tango via a selection of its many features and characteristics that are important for my investigation.

The introductory chapter 2, *Preparing the philosophical dance floor*, notes that one's own actions have not been part of the dominant theories of aesthetics, except in somaesthetics. This chapter provides one empirical and two theoretical arguments for the validity of the beautiful