

CN D

CALL FOR PAPERS

International conference

Competing?!

Centre national de la danse, Pantin – France

September 28 > 30, 2023

While the Paris Olympic and Paralympic games are set to begin in 2024, this international conference wishes to interrogate the history and practice of dance competitions, in connection to competitive sports events. If much has been written on competing, especially in an Olympic setting, dance has received less critical attention¹ when it comes to its physical, artistic and social dimensions.

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What does competing involve? If the verb “to compete” in its most common meaning conveys a sense of challenge, of competing against one another, its Latin origin was understood in the Renaissance period to refer to “coming together”, and “agreeing”. In mathematics, “competing” means “converging”, therefore referring to the Early Modern meaning of the term and to the idea of “converging at the same time and place”.

Competing also articulates a certain proxemic lexical dimension, around which notions of antagonism and inter-dependence gravitate. Thus, the term “competition”, which refers to “a contest between rivals”, also conveys a sense of working concurrently, of competing towards a similar goal, and is also etymologically connected to the idea of “concurring”, of agreeing, or to the meeting of concurrent lines in one point. “Competition” has a sense of simultaneity, of bringing people together around a common objective. In addition to its use in the fields of trade or politics, its meaning was broadened in 19th-century England to designate more peaceful forms of rivalry, especially in connection to sports. The term “challenge” was used in the context of the first baseball games, horse-riding events and races, or athletic events, which were all both competitions and games, with an idea of rivalry but also a playful component.

Indeed, competing is also connected to the notion of playing, as defined by Dutch historian Johan Huizinga in his book *Homo Ludens*: “play is a voluntary activity or occupation executed within certain fixed limits of time and place, according to rules freely accepted but absolutely binding, having its aim in itself and accompanied by a feeling of tension, joy and the consciousness that it is «different» from «ordinary life»”.² However, competing differs from playing both in its organization and in its goal: indeed, competing involves qualified experts and judges to evaluate the performance according to a precise set of criteria, and only a limited number of candidates can succeed and earn the job, title, reward or any other prize.

All of these definitions encompass several historical contexts, whether one focuses on the artistic and athletic competitions in the Ancient Greek Olympic Games - which were devised as a religious truce during wartime - or on the tournaments and pageants of the knights in the Middle Ages, which were also substitutes for actual fighting in wars, or even on contemporary forms of competition, which, regardless of discipline and type, all promote a level playing field between competitors and are connected to notions of social evolution. If the latter differ from earlier forms of rivalry, they are also rites of passage and they participate in the production of individual and collective social and psychological constructions through the impressive feats performed during competitions and the values of fair play that bring people together in these events.

The notion of competition structures the choreographic and performing life of dancers around the world, from the *Archives internationales de la danse* competition in 1932 or the “*Un ballet pour demain*” Bagnolet dance competition in the 1980’s, to local, regional and national events sponsored by the French Federation of Dance or the Youth America Grand Prix, from the BOTY (Battle of the Year) to the “Dance élargie” events or the African Rencontres chorégraphiques, the Yokohama Dance Collection, the battles between samba schools during the Carnival period, ... All these events take place in diverse contexts and settings, with different parameters. The Lausanne or Varna competitions feature classical and contemporary variations from canonical repertoires; hip-hop battles can either randomly pop up in the street or be organized in theatres, and are based on improvisation with a codified set of rules and organization.

Bringing together the knowledge of different fields in the humanities and the practical experience of dance-makers, this conference aims to outline a history of competing in dance and to highlight individual and collective stakes as moments where effort, innovation, emulation, distinction and confrontation are combined and encoded. We aim at identifying diverse forms of competitions, question how and why they were created, how they work, at

1. One exception is *The Oxford Handbook of Dance and Competition*, 2019, ed. Sherill Dodds.

2. Johan Huizinga, *Homo Ludens, A Study of the Play-Element in Culture*, London: Routledge, 1949, p.28.

what pace and frequency, the shapes and forms they can take, as well as their functions and meanings, to emphasize the diversity of competing practices as well as their aesthetics. Both their receptions in the public space and their material or immaterial dynamics will be examined, as well as their institutional and symbolic roles.

One of our objectives will therefore be to develop a documented reflection around the history of competing in dance so as to enrich our knowledge of dance culture around the world. We invite a great diversity of points of view and experiences from contributors, and we hope to mobilize both micro- and macro-readings of several historical, social, economic, political and cultural contexts, as well as multiple fields of study, from dance and sports research to movement analysis, medicine, anthropology, praxeology, philosophy as well as socio-cultural history and sociology.

We invite various formats for papers, which can address one or more of the following axes:

AXIS 1

Competition and emulation: how the practice of competition helps build choreographic practices

Whether it is meant for professionals, pre-professionals or non-professionals, the practice of dance competitions - of all kinds - is a landmark in the individual trajectories of performers and it structures the artistic, athletic, institutional, media and economic life of dance practitioners. Whether we consider end-of-the-year exams in conservatories, auditions or competitions, what is at stake is a ritualized rivalry between individuals, but also emphasis or decline of certain types of movement and artistic identities, in a field where the “rules of the game” of physical practices are constantly tested, played out, reinvented, along with their norms and values.

Participants and networks

Multiple kinds of knowledge and points of view are brought together in this context: the candidates', members of the jury', the audience's and the media's, therefore participating in constructing perceptions, sensibilities, and modes of reception of dance in dedicated spaces and their surroundings. Dance competitions of all kinds are thus instrumental in what art sociologist Howard Becker describes as the way the “art worlds” work, and through which multiple practitioners (teachers, musicians, coaches, physical therapists, experts, photographers, company directors, sponsors,...) work conjointly towards the fabrication of an elite, and support the economic growth of the field. We can therefore wonder if competitions have always been instrumental in the life and development of choreographic cultures: which type of participants, networks, communities, institutions and specific modalities do these competitions bring together? How do competitions evolve and adapt to internal and external changes and phenomena? To what extent do competitions participate in creating economies of performance?

Confrontation and recognition

While competitions are a space of rivalry, they also create an emulative environment and invite participants to outdo themselves and each other, whether as professionals or non-professionals. Because they are selective, they also participate in fulfilling the chosen ones' vocations and serve a meritocratic ideal. Being recognized by one's peers and elders is high praise for the winners, and it allows them to inscribe themselves in a lineage of victors, through the prizes and medals they receive. We will therefore wonder how the values of dance competitions support and foster a desire to surpass oneself, but also how a competition's impact can be measured throughout the career of an artist.

Medals reward victory in the Olympic context and serve to publicize the exploits of the winners, but in a choreographic context, visibility can be gained. We can therefore interrogate how a community can both borrow and critique a certain kind of legitimacy

through competition - balls in the context of voguing, for example, or competitions organized on social media with a non-professional jury, such as the ones organized by the video game Fortnite which integrates the winning choreography in the narrative of the game.

All of these questions will lead us to interrogate the construction of choreographic practices inside and outside Europe, and to ask how they actually offer other templates for emulation and confrontation.

AXIS 2

Norms and singularity: shaping bodies

A history of the gaze

Rules, prizes, recognition, academic tradition and innovation, virtuosity and expression, are some of the features of competitions. If competing implies a set of common norms which govern choreographies and the shaping of bodies, it also aims at fostering the development of individual talent and diverse physicalities and personalities.

This second axis focuses on the various formats competitions can adopt, as well as the way several levels of qualification and modes of judging / refereeing are built for choreographic pieces. How does one evaluate a dance? What are the required skills and experience needed to do so? How does deep time and intergenerational transmission come into play in the way a performative framework is established? How are the different gazes constructed and interconnected around technical performance and artistic interpretation? What makes cultures and approaches different from or similar to one another?

Nowadays, social media is instrumental in the organization and development of competitions, so we need a historical framework to gain perspective on how audiences have been involved in judging and evaluating processes. We will study how norms and established processes evolve and contribute to creating a new outlook, a new way of seeing dance competitions.

Performance's Lights and shadows

Competitions reveal talents but also leave some in the shadows; we can therefore interrogate what type of talents are revealed on these occasions, and which kinds of skills are promoted or not in this context. What is the relation to physical expression in training processes? What type of repertoire or stylistic executions are highlighted or on the contrary cast aside? Does it promote innovation and new artistic or athletic contributions?

To this end, we will try to think of the means a competition mobilizes to foster inclusivity, in terms of gender or racial diversity, orientation or identification. How are non-virtuoso physicalities, atypical bodies or disabilities included or not?

It's also important to interrogate how failure impacts the losing candidates and their background. Competition can also negatively impact the physical and mental health of dancers, so we explore how alternative somatic-based pedagogies come into play in that type of physical performance.

AXIS 3

Shifting terrain, between sports and dance

This third axis proposes to interrogate the specific relations between dance and sport in a contemporary context. We will therefore look at the antagonisms, tensions, but also the permeability between the sports world and the choreographic world. If dancers consider themselves primarily as artists and shun values of high-performance competition which they associate with the sports world, their training practices and the way they look at health and physical discipline are actually quite similar to that of athletes. Conversely, gymnasts,

figure-skaters or swimmers who engage in artistic competitions in their disciplines consider themselves as both athletes and artists. We can interrogate what these relations between dance and sports reveal about the construction of individual and collective identities in that context.

AXIS 4

Circulation and imagination

Competitions feed the aura of artists and athletes while boosting the prestige of the participating institutions, and they stimulate imagination as well as representation processes in the long run. This is what this axis wishes to interrogate: how visual culture (TV, cinema, as well as the digital sphere, literature, and media) can represent these “dance chronicles” and feature specific moments, how it emphasizes specific figures and fosters imagination and dreams. Indeed, visual culture participates in the making of dance-related images and the construction of an entire imaginary around dance - memory, but also what is omitted, or forgotten. Choreographers themselves contribute to the circulation of these representations and symbols by representing competitions in their own works, in an embedded act of representation ranging from tribute to parody.

AXIS 5

Power theory and practice: body politics

This last axis will lead us to highlight the relations between dance and politics. If competitions are intrinsically connected to notions of equality and excellence, its professional and artistic scope can however be broadened to overarching causes or be influenced by various external pressures. For example, a competition can promote a political project, or be connected to public policies, be recuperated or instrumentalized for propaganda purposes or by authoritarian ideologies. For example, the role of modern dance in connection to the 1936 Berlin Olympics or that of ballet during the Cold War can be examined to investigate how complex the relations between dance and politics are.

We therefore invite participants to contextualize competitions in their geopolitical and geo-aesthetic contexts, whether local, transregional, national, international or global. How are gestures, physical practices, and ideas codified and circulated in the context of a competition? How does cultural cartography come into play in the process of visualizing borders, tensions and arbitration in the political and diplomatic game? If competitions are submitted to certain forms of domination, how can participants position themselves in that context, and how can they subvert it?

Presenters are invited to interrogate to what extent dance competitions, as a moment of collective gathering around a particular project, participate in the invention, development or preservation of communities brought together by common values. How are dance competitions a breeding ground for “miniature nations” , “imagined communities” or “emotional communities” , of variable sizes and lifespans?

If historicizing these phenomena as well as designating their protagonists and the networks that support them constitutes an important part of our conference, along with locating these historicized phenomena in a socio-political history of our relation to them, we will also broaden our reflection to include what is at stake in the present day and context, by measuring the effects and impact that natural catastrophes, the current pandemic and wars have had on the way competitions work and how they (de)structure the world of sports and choreography.

3. Olivier Grenouilleau, *Nos Petites Patries. Identités régionales et État central, en France, des origines à nos jours*, Paris, Gallimard, coll. « Bibliothèque des histoires », 2019.

4. Benedict Anderson, *L'Imaginaire national : réflexions sur l'origine et l'essor du nationalisme*, La Découverte, 1996 [*Imagined Communities: Reflexions on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism*, 1983].

5. Alain Corbin, Jean-Jacques Courtine, Georges Vigarello (dir.), *Histoire des Émotions*, Paris, Seuil, 2017.

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- Jean-Marc Huitorel, *La Beauté du geste : l'art contemporain et le sport*, Paris, Éditions du Regard, 2005 ; *Sur l'art, le sport, le jeu. Une forme olympique*, Jouy-en-Josas, Espace d'art contemporain HEC, 2017 ;
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- Pierre-Emmanuel Sorignet, *Danser. Enquête dans les coulisses d'une vocation*, Paris, La Découverte, 2012 ; « Un processus de recrutement sur un marché du travail artistique : le cas de l'audition en danse contemporaine », *Genèses*, 57, 2004.

Scientific committee

- Inge Baxmann, drama and performance studies professor, University of Leipzig
- Emmanuelle Delattre-Destemberg, associate professor of contemporary history, Université polytechnique Hauts-de France (Valenciennes), affiliated to the Laboratoire de recherche Sociétés et Humanités (LARSH) and the CRISS (centre de recherche interdisciplinaire en sciences de la société)
- Olga De Soto, choreographer, dancer and dance scholar
- Amala Dianor, choreographer and dancer
- Agathe Dumont, professor of artistic studies at the Ecole supérieure d'art et de design-Tours Angers Le Mans, independent scholar
- Pascal Duret, professor of sociology in the Université de la Réunion
- Laure Guilbert, PhD in history, independent scholar, and associate researcher with the Centre d'histoire sociale des mondes contemporains (Université de Paris 1) and the Institut Convergences Migrations (Campus Condorcet)
- Romain Haguenaer, co-founder of the Ice Academy of Montreal
- Thierry Malandain, choreographer and artistic director of the Centre chorégraphique national Malandain Ballet Biarritz
- Felicia McCarren, professor in the French and Italian department, Tulane University, and associate researcher with the EHESS (Fulbright-Tocqueville distinguished chair, 2023), guest scholar in Oxford University (Leverhulme Visiting Professor, 2022-2023)
- Valentine Nagata-Ramos, choreographer and artistic director of Uzumaki company
- Rachid Ouramdane, choreographer and current director of Chaillot-théâtre national de la danse in Paris
- Marc Perelman, emeritus professor in Aesthetics
- Pierre-Emmanuel Sorignet, professor of sociology in Lausanne University

Scientific coordination

- Laurent Barré, director of the Research and Choreographic Repertoire department, CN D
- Laetitia Basselier, PhD in dance philosophy

Modalities and organization

The CFP is open to all scholars working on dance, teachers, graduate students and PhD candidates, young graduates, artists and other professionals. The conference will be in French but a translation will be available for papers given in English and Spanish (or any other language - please contact us for further information: colloque2023@cnd.fr).

Several formats are possible for presenters:

1. Traditional academic format (20-minute presentation, followed by a 10-minute Q&A) ;
2. dance presentation: performance, dance event involving the audience, collective practice or any other creative format (30 to 40 min.) ;
3. group interdisciplinary panels involving artists, teachers, dance practitioners, academics, etc... (duration between 1h and 1h30 for a group of 3 to 6 presenters) ;
4. video interventions (particularly ones that bring a fresh perspective to what is at stake with competitions - maximum duration: 1 hour) ;
5. 2-people conversation around a performance, where experience as well as theoretical notions are shared with the audience (1 hour).

We also encourage presenters to propose innovative digital presentations with a creative take on the possibilities listed above.

Abstracts (in English or in French) can be sent before December 1st, 2022, to the following email address: colloque2023@cnd.fr

All abstracts must feature :

- The presenter's name, affiliation, and email
- The title of the paper
- Which format has been selected for the presentation, and which axis it is connected to
- A short bio (around 1000 signs, spaces included)

The length of the abstract will not exceed 3000 signs (including spaces)

Financial support is available to the presenters of the conference except for colleagues already in tenured positions. Subventions can also be awarded to help pay for transportation and housing, and priority will be given to presenters who have no institutional support.

Selection of the papers and draft program: March 6, 2023