

# PINA . . . ARE YOU THERE?

**Emily Carson Coates**

*“ . . . como el musguito en la piedra, ay si, si, si . . . ”* (Like moss on a stone), Tanztheater Wuppertal, choreography by Pina Bausch, Brooklyn Academy of Music Next Wave Festival, Brooklyn, NY, October 18–27, 2012.

Pina Bausch created the fragile ecosystem that is *“ . . . como el musguito en la piedra, ay si, si, si . . . ”* (Like moss on a stone) during Tanztheater Wuppertal’s 2009 residency in Santiago, Chile, but aside from the music and traditional South American garb that appears midway through, Chilean culture is not the foremost idea transmitted in the piece. Read in hindsight, the work poignantly documents the people and directorial strategies that most interested Bausch during the final year of her life. Its position as her Last Work—noted by many critics and impossible to ignore—renders moot the kind of critique that would summarize its strengths and weaknesses. The piece is stunning and also imperfect, but this seems to me to be beside the point. I prefer instead to consider *“ . . . como el musguito ”* as one more artifact of Bausch’s still-active gaze.

The piece begins with Silvia Farias Heredia on her hands and knees. Two men enter, assess her position, pick her

up and shift her to another location on the stage. As they do so she begins to laugh. Not girlish giggles, but another more guttural and disturbing sound emanates. More men enter and sweep her along in a pattern of lifts. When finally left alone, she dances a poetic monologue, which confers insight into her joys, sorrows, and sighs, expressed in swirling kinesthetic shapes. In a familiar Bausch motif, Heredia’s waist-length hair extends her physicality, painting the space around her. Heredia’s solo sets up the expectation that *“ . . . como el musguito ”* will depict the emotional life of women, for not one but two women are palpably present: Bausch’s subjectivity commingles with Heredia’s, operating just under the surface to conjure forth her dance.

*“ . . . como el musguito ”* unfolds primarily through solos, which share this same loving attention between Bausch and her dancers. During Rainer Behr’s eventual solo, the white floor of the stage begins to crack apart, creating rifts that he must

navigate. Peter Pabst's set is one of the few looming threats in the piece. It may reflect the fault lines running under the country, and Chile's long and fraught history with earthquakes. At several degrees of aesthetic and referential remove, however, the cracking planet and the deaths it causes remain merely allusions. Much of the piece operates in this way, as a beautifully aestheticized translation of forms, an idea of Chile so supremely subjective that it erases the place itself and its history.

Fernando Suels Mendoza's solo introduces another ambiguous image when he dances alone in waves crashing ashore, projected across a moonlit stage. Mendoza's movement is tighter and more muscled than the other Wuppertal men, yet in this scene he swoons lasciviously. This image feels functional: the water augments his flow, which allows his solo to stay very much within the vein of Bausch's relentlessly aqueous style. Perhaps the most important aspect of this travel piece—the last in a series on world cities that began in 1984—is the continued relationship that it fostered between Bausch and her dancers.

If “. . . *como el musguito*” is not about Chile, but rather Bausch's relationship with her dancers, the question arises: what exactly does the choreography signify? Roland Barthes described a photograph as “an emanation of the referent. From a real body, which was there, proceed radiations which ultimately touch me, who am here; the duration of the transmission is insignificant; the photograph of the missing being . . . will touch me like the delayed rays of a star.”<sup>1</sup> A dance can also signify a reality no longer present. But the referent transmitted through the solos and action-images

of “. . . *como el musguito*” is not Heredia, nor the other dancers, nor even their life experiences, as one might first assume. The choreography's ultimate emanating referent, which is also the missing being, is Bausch's gaze.

In her development process, Bausch replaced her body with her eyes to a more intense degree than any choreographer I know. In much modern dance repertory, the choreographer gives birth to material through his or her body, and the dancers translate its tics and quirks. In the repertory of Trisha Brown, for instance, Brown's body passes through her dancers in an almost paranormal act of observation and inhabitation. Bausch, on the other hand, repositioned herself within her process to become almost exclusively the watching eye. Video footage of Bausch in rehearsal tends to show her sitting behind a table at the front of the studio, puffing on a cigarette and staring at her dancers with that acutely active, signature gaze.

During an Iconic Artist Talk sponsored by the Brooklyn Academy of Music, where I saw “. . . *como el musguito*” last October, Barbara Kaufmann and Dominique Mercy, two of Bausch's longtime dancers now responsible for maintaining her repertory, described the chemistry of this gaze. Bausch began every new piece with fertile verbal prompts that she used to provoke her dancers into action. Out of these words, the dancers improvised, creating emotions, images, and movements. Bausch studied their work and took notes, as did the dancers. She slowly began to recycle and layer the material until the vignettes generated a tension that moved her eye. Sometimes she asked the dancers to recall moments in improvisations they had done weeks



Top: Tsai Chin Yu, “. . . como el musguito en la piedra, ay si, si, si . . .” (*Like moss on a stone*), Brooklyn Academy of Music Next Wave Festival, Brooklyn, NY. Photo: Stephanie Berger. Bottom: Damiano Ottavio Bigi, Rainer Behr, Morena Nascimento, “. . . como el musguito en la piedra, ay si, si, si . . .” (*Like moss on a stone*), Brooklyn Academy of Music Next Wave Festival, Brooklyn, NY. Photo: Stephanie Berger.

earlier. With an impeccable memory, she honed in on details. Kaufmann remembered once creating an elaborate movement study—the one detail that caught Bausch’s eye was Kaufmann’s umbrella penetrating an orange. She liked the sound it made. Bausch’s productions came into existence under this felt pressure of observation, combined with her ability to keep watching and waiting until something interesting happened.

The dancers described Bausch’s approach as a “growing process,” which was not based on a concept but on accumulated experiences. Mercy said that Bausch’s works arose through seeing “what happens between us and herself . . . what chemically works.” Kaufmann further explained, “We went along with her, with our patience, to allow the process to happen.” Bausch had an idea of what she was looking for and recognized it once she saw it with the certainty of gut instinct. A scene’s effectiveness had to survive repetition or she scrapped it.

Solos and action-images must have held the greatest fascination for Bausch’s eyes in 2009, for they are the driving motifs of “. . . *como el musguito*.” In one of the more dramatic action-images, a man scales a rope stretched diagonally across the stage. Constrained at the waist by another rope, Tsai Chin Yu sweeps at a forty-five-degree angle, struggling to reach him. Bausch’s familiar preoccupation with gender politics softens and flips. While a woman is constrained and carried by the men in the first scene, later another woman strips two men of their shirts and pushes them to the floor to do push-ups, while she lies blithely astride their legs and counts. Other images are pure graphic design, as when the men of the company line up one at a

time, head-to-toe, while a suit jacket is slowly pulled up the line, over the head of one man to the feet of the next. The line appears to exist in perpetuity and then dissolves; the dancers disperse and another scene begins.

Bausch’s eye is not avant-garde in its timing. She does not test the viewer’s attention, but rather allows an image to be seen for just enough time, and then lets it go. She creates her images with minimal means: a few dancers and a suit jacket; a chair, bottle of water, and makeup bag; hard gray stones, dropped by the company women from one hand and then the other, and then retrieved. While the means are minimal, the images themselves are lush, sensual, and hedonistic. Defying the simple tasks, her action-images coil like springs waiting to pop. Their tension contains the remnants of her gaze.

Not until three-quarters of the way through the work did I feel Bausch’s absence. It hit me during a solo by one of the younger men with frosted, shredded hair to a piece of music that sounded like Philip Glass’s *Einstein on the Beach*. Something vacated the stage. I could no longer feel the connection between the emotionality of his movement and its bravura form. I felt he was spinning and leaping and lowering to floor in a display of technique more than emotion. The moment passed when another younger male dancer slid in upstage, providing a much-needed contrast—his connectivity for whatever reason holding firm. The older dancers retain the tie between movement, emotion, and self when they dance because they have internalized the alchemy of Bausch’s eyes. It is the younger ones for whom the connection is tenuous, not as firmly sealed. They

are the most at risk of losing hold of Bausch's gaze.

As tempting as it is to read “. . . *como el mosquito*” as Bausch's summary of all that mattered, in reality it is simply one more step along her journey as a creator. No one expected her to depart that journey when she did, perhaps not even Bausch. Because of this place in her canon, I find it interesting that it is not clear when the piece will end. When she is ready to wrap it up, Bausch simply rewinds the scenes, a device that is not accompanied by very dramatic or compelling music. It seems to come because she had suddenly become aware that two and a half hours had passed, or someone had told her she had better wrap it up for the venues that would present the work. Seeing Heredia return to her kneeling position felt anticlimactic. The ending did not feel like the ending.

What did feel like an ending—or if not an ending, a moment of conjuring—was an interlude about three-quarters of the way through. A couple enters, apparently searching for privacy, which turns into

an assessment of the space and finally a search for the unseen and unknown. Pulling the woman with him, the man whistles, gazing across the vast and darkening stage. He whistles again. They wait expectantly. He claps. He claps again. The sound echoes. She joins him. And then the stage is populated with dancers, collectively intent on delivering single, resounding claps in unison. This is a rare moment without music, which breaks up the monotony of the soundtrack. We listen. We watch. We wait. Pina . . . ?

Then the spell breaks. The stage clears once more and the dance continues. This was the real ending, which was not an ending but an ellipsis: a summoning of the not long gone, watching and waiting for something to happen. I felt in that moment that the dancers were speaking to Pina.

#### NOTE

1. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 1981), 81.

---

EMILY CARSON COATES has danced with New York City Ballet, Mikhail Baryshnikov's White Oak Dance Project, Twyla Tharp Dance, and Yvonne Rainer. Her current projects include co-authoring with particle physicist Sarah Demers an interdisciplinary book on physics and dance, forthcoming from Yale University Press. She teaches at Yale University, where she has directed the dance studies curriculum since its inception in 2006.

Pina Bausch  
in *Cafe Müller*.  
Photo: Ulli Weiss.  
Courtesy Brooklyn  
Academy of Music.

