

EX|FONTE

Journal of Ecumenical Studies in Liturgy

VOLUME 4 | 2025

Active Participation in Dance and Liturgy

A Liturgical Dance Performance
as Practice-as-Research

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How to Cite

VLOEBERGS, Sander, Active Participation in Dance and Liturgy. A Liturgical Dance Performance as Practice-as-Research, in: *Ex Fonte – Journal of Ecumenical Studies in Liturgy* 4 (2025) 371–412.

DOI [10.25365/exf-2025-4-18](https://doi.org/10.25365/exf-2025-4-18)

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Abstract

This article explores the potential of liturgical dance as a form of theological inquiry through the case study *OPUS CORPORIS*, a choreographic intervention within the Catholic Eucharist. Developed as a practice-as-research project, the performance is analyzed as a hybrid form that reimagines the concept of active participation and challenges conventional boundaries between ritual and performance. Drawing on liturgical theology, performance studies, and contemporary dance, the article first situates the concept within historical developments in church and dance traditions. It then offers a close analysis of the performance, suggesting that it destabilizes normative liturgical scripts and provokes theological reflection – indicating that doubt, disruption, and improvisation are not obstacles to faith, but essential forms of participation. It highlights how such hybrid forms destabilize normative liturgical structures, provoke theological reflection, and invite renewed engagement with the sacred through embodied imagination.

Keywords

Liturgical Dance | Performance Art | Participation, Active | Eucharist | Catholic Church | Theology – Methodology | Embodiment (Philosophy)

Active Participation in Dance and Liturgy

A Liturgical Dance Performance as Practice-as-Research

SANDER VLOEBERGS

1 Introduction

After several decades, artistic dance and ritual performances have reconnected on stage. In recent years, artists, cultural professionals, and critics have noticed how a significant group of choreographers are explicitly exploring the language, imagery, and gestures from the repertoire of religious rituals.¹ This current symbiosis between dance and ritual is not surprising, as researchers have highlighted the similarities between performance art and ritual practice for several decades and have questioned the strict separation between these two domains.² Performance art no longer

¹ See, for example, the journal *Dancehouse Diary*'s themed issue *Sacred and Profane – Rituals of Now*, cf. Angela CONQUET, *The End of Transcendence? In Praise of Rituals*, in: *Dancehouse Diary* 7 (2014). [↗](#) In Belgium, the editors of the performance magazine *Etcetera* published similar observations. See Charlotte DE SOMEVIELE et al., *De kracht van het ongrijpbare*, in: *Etcetera* 173 (2023) 1–3. [↗](#)

² The performative turn in ritual studies gained momentum through the pioneering work of Victor Turner and Richard Schechner, who abolished the strict separation between serious and immutable rituals and experimental theater and performance. See Victor TURNER, *From Ritual to Theatre. The Human Seriousness of Play*, New York 1982; Richard SCHECHNER, *Between Theater & Anthropology*, Philadelphia 1985. More recently, the work of rit-

belongs exclusively to the realm of entertainment and make-believe, and rituals are not confined to the realm of authentic, serious, and immutable practices. This symbiosis allows for the analysis of current ritual changes and artistic innovations that emerge in the process of ritualization, which occurs when rituals transcend their social boundaries, and the meaning and relevance of existing rites no longer meet the needs of the community. Processes of ritualization begin when the rites themselves are in a state of decadence or denial, according to Ronald Grimes.³ Contemporary dance artists have grasped the opportunity, supported by these academic frameworks, to creatively engage with these ritual forms to address societal and planetary dilemmas and establish academic and social credibility for the emerging field of dance studies.

Dance artists claim expertise in the domain of embodied knowledge and challenge traditional epistemic frameworks associated with the Western colonial project of modernity. Art critics and philosophers state that the postmodern Western world is inheriting a historically failed logocentrism that has resulted in a noticeable fascination with the representations and experiences of the human body, which became an anchor point for the ineffable mysteries ignored in rational societies and cultures.⁴ This position often results in a hesitation to address Western forms of religious ritual and spirituality.⁵ While the exploration of embodied knowledge

ual scholar Ronald Grimes is worth mentioning. See Ronald GRIMES, *Rite Out of Place. Ritual, Media, and the Arts*, New York 2006. Scholars have also noted an aesthetic turn in religious studies and the renewed interest in various art forms as potential opportunities for interreligious and intercultural dialogue. Cf. Heike WALZ, *Dance as a Third Space. Interreligious and Interdisciplinary Debates on Dance and Religion(s) in the Perspective of Religious Studies and Intercultural Theology*, in: EAD. (ed.), *Dance as Third Space. Interreligious, Intercultural, and Interdisciplinary Debates on Dance and Religion(s) (Research in Contemporary Religion 32)*, Göttingen 2022, 27–68, here: 35.

³ Cf. Ronald GRIMES, *Fictive Ritual. Reading, Writing, & Ritualizing*, Waterloo 2013, 19.

⁴ Cf. James ELKINS, *Introduction. Liquid Thoughts on the Body and Religion*, in: Barbara BAERT (ed.), *Fluid Flesh. The Body, Religion and the Visual Arts (Lieven Gevaert Series 8)*, Leuven 2009, ix–xvi, here: xv.

⁵ Instead, most attention has been given to the fruitful contribution of perfor-

in relation to the intersection of art and spirituality is gaining popularity, curators and (dance) artists are often explicitly excluding institutionalized Western religions, and their art practices shy away from organized religion in favor of an inclusive spirituality.⁶

Christianity and its theology stand out as an absent partner in this interesting discussion.⁷ Due to its long and problematic history concerning the body and its disciplinary preference for written sources, contemporary theology still struggles with the lack of conceptual tools to articulate the contribution of dance and embodied knowledge to the field of theology and religious studies.⁸ These discussions about embodiment are, nevertheless, of extreme urgency as religious scholars propose a participatory turn.⁹ Heike Peckruhn states that hitherto, any attempt to construct

mance studies to the anthropological study of shamanism, in particular the psychology, sociology and cosmology of shamans and their communities. Moreover, the study of shamanic cultures has offered new insight into formation, maintenance and contestation of cultures in relation to (ritual) performances. Cf. Graham HARVEY, General Introduction, in: ID. (ed.), *Shamanism. A Reader*, London 2003, 1–24, here: 15.

⁶ Cf. Leesa FANNING, *Encountering the Spiritual in Contemporary Art*, New Haven 2018, 42 f. Amanda Williamson argues that dance studies and dance education have recently interacted with the field of spirituality, excluding institutionalized religion. Cf. Amanda WILLIAMSON et al., Introduction, in: EAD. et al. (eds.), *Dance, Somatics and Spiritualities. Contemporary Sacred Narratives*, Bristol – Chicago 2014, xxv–xxxiii, here: xxv–xviii.

⁷ Cf. Anne-Marie GASTON – Tony GASTON, *Dance as a Way of Being Religious*, in: Frank B. BROWN (ed.), *The Oxford Handbook of Religion and the Arts*, New York 2014, 182–202, here: 197.

⁸ Kimerer LaMothe has pointed out the historical frictions between dance, religious studies, and theology as academic disciplines. Parallel to the dichotomy between serious ritual and entertaining theater, dance was not seen as a serious activity. Theology associated itself with the increasing importance of Western writing culture and denied its roots in bodily experience and dance, which was relegated to the realm of leisure. Cf. Kimerer L. LAMOTHE, *Between Dancing and Writing. The Practice of Religious Studies*, New York 2004, 1–4.

⁹ These studies of embodiment form a crucial part of the participatory turn, next to postcolonial revelation of emic epistemologies, feminist and modern emphasis of gender, the sensuous and the erotic, the pragmatic em-

bodily theology was only concerned with body metaphors and not with bodily perception as such. However, for her, true body theology is an “analytical commitment in conversation with different theologies which hold concerns and commitments in regard to engaging and exploring varied embodiments and their effect on our orientation in and interpretation of the world”¹⁰. Constructive theological reflection is always done as embodied selves, perceiving and experiencing the world. The ordinary *Lebenswelt* is a side to explore these theologies and discover new metaphors.¹¹

Dance research could invite and assist theology in adopting practice-based methodologies to explore embodied theological practice and reflection. Theologians such as Angel F. Méndez Montoya have recently highlighted the potential of this fruitful collaboration. Dance offers theology the opportunity to rediscover the epistemic impact of the body. Dance evokes a myriad of stories, poetics, and images, reminding theology that the body is not an object to be discarded; rather, it brings resistance, creativity, and transformative relationality. Theology, in turn, contributes to dance studies by opening the imagination to the possibility of transcendence and ecstasy related to the Christian belief in the incarnation.¹² The symbiosis of these research domains requires a shift in skills that surpasses classical theological training. By moving beyond the traditional

phasis on transformation and antirepresentationalism and the renewed interest in the study of lived spirituality, resacralization of language, the question of metaphysical truth and the irreducibility of religious pluralism. The body became a key hermeneutic category in the study of religion over the last two decades which brought forth studies of perception, representation, and uses of the body in religious practices, bodily postures and movements in the religious experience and ritual. Cf. Jorge N. FERRER – Jacob H. SCHERMAN, Introduction, in: IID. (eds.), *The Participatory Turn in Spirituality, Mysticism, and Religious Studies*, New York 2008, 1–78, here: 12.

¹⁰ Heike PECKRUHN, *Meaning in Our Bodies. Sensory Experience as Constructive Theological Imagination*, New York 2017, 23.

¹¹ Cf. PECKRUHN, *Meaning*, 22 f.

¹² Cf. Angel F. MÉNDEZ MONTOYA, *Flesh, Body, and Embodiment. Surplus of Corporeal Becoming*, in: Heike WALZ (ed.), *Dance as Third Space. Interreligious, Intercultural, and Interdisciplinary Debates on Dance and Religion(s)* (Research in Contemporary Religion 32), Göttingen 2022, 291–304, here: 298–302.

skills of writing and reading, greater consideration can be given to the embodied reality of faith communities and the world in which they live.¹³ However, the development of those skills and new insights have resulted in empirical and theoretical studies; a practice-based approach to “dance theology” is still missing.

In this article, I discuss the possibilities and challenges that arise when liturgical dance is used as practice-as-research within Christian theology and the Catholic Church, based on experimental and artistic research. It differs from previous attempts to study embodied knowledge because it is an experimental approach to theology in which the dance performance constructs a made-up reality in which the theological event takes place – following the process of ritualization. It differs from previous liturgical dances because of its research-driven nature that questions and reevaluates the nature of dance and liturgy as such.¹⁴ I therefore propose to introduce and analyze a recent liturgical dance performance as a case study for this exciting innovation in “body theology”.

The performance *OPUS CORPORIS*, a choreographic project within the liturgy, was designed and performed by me, in collaboration with Lukas Sünder, at the Kunst Kultur Kirche Allerheiligen in Frankfurt. It was presented during two consecutive Sunday masses and two evening performances in June 2022. Recently, this project was restaged at BAC Art Lab Leuven as a dance performance, supported by the University's Cultural Office. It was discussed and evaluated in the context of two undergraduate courses in the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies. This article examines the research process and the outcomes of this project in

¹³ Cf. Laura HELLSTEN, *Dance in between Ritual and Liturgy. An Exploration of Theory and Practice in the Field of Dance and Theology*, in: *Studia Theologica. Nordic Journal of Theology* 78 (2023) 1–23, here: 12.

¹⁴ Sarah Coakley briefly initiates an embodied reflection in her autobiographical intermezzo on female priesthood in the Anglican Church. She concludes that gestures, bodily disposition, vocal tone and sartorial choices are significant too, when it comes to practicing theology and discovering her identity as a female minister. Liturgical performance is not an arbitrary side product of the normative liturgical text. It should be displayed, discussed and duly adjudicated. Cf. Sarah COAKLEY, *The New Asceticism. Sexuality, Gender and the Quest for God*, London 2015, 60–63.

relation to the theological and artistic frameworks within which prevalent concepts and practices are questioned and renegotiated.

OPUS CORPORIS proposes a hybrid form that fluctuates between Catholic Eucharist and dance performance. Central to this project is the concept of active participation, which challenges classical notions of spectatorship. Traditionally, the notion of a dance performance implies that the proposed event is fictional, and that the audience participates passively. They observe and interpret the event but do not form an intrinsic and indispensable part of what unfolds on stage. This presumed dynamic between spectator and performer shifts when the dance performance becomes an actual liturgical event. During the Eucharist, both the priest and the assembly participate in the liturgical event, which cannot take place if either is absent. OPUS CORPORIS brings the question of the nature of participation and the spectacular qualities of the (made up) dance ritual to the forefront.

To discuss the notion of active participation in the contemporary liturgical dance performance, I will first provide a brief history of the concept in liturgical and artistic dance. Since the mid-20th century, these dance traditions have undergone significant changes and have consequently grown apart. Nevertheless, active participation has remained central to both. Then I describe and analyze OPUS CORPORIS as an innovative proposal to reunite dance research and liturgical dance around this central theme within the framework of an artistic and theological practice-as-research project. When theologian-dancers begin to experiment with the strict and scripted forms of Catholic liturgy, an openness emerges that is historically rare. This new form allows for the rewriting of theology at its core and challenges dance with new forms and ritual practices that further explores the potential of what dance can be. This research promises to make a unique contribution to the flourishing symbiosis between dance art and ritual.



Figure 1

2 A History of Active Participation

2.1 Active Participation in Church (Dance) History

Active participation is a concept that has significantly shaped both the 20th-century Catholic Church and the artistic dance scene. As early as 1903, the concept took a central place in the motu proprio *Tra le Sollicitudini* by Pope Pius X. He aimed to remind Christians of their duty to actively participate in the mysteries of the liturgy and the prayer life of the Church. Only in this way could one acquire the true Christian spirit, the Pope asserted.¹⁵ Influential theologians such as Romano Guardini and Hugo Rahner expanded the implications of the concept, recognizing the need for the modern Church to renew itself and relate to contemporary society. Both theologians focused on liturgical innovations that could help the community to actively participate in and contribute to the Church. The arts could contribute significantly to this cause. Rahner even mentions the special role of sacred dance, which “has been woven around the austere core of liturgy”¹⁶.

Meanwhile, particularly in the USA and Germany, pioneers of modern dance made a name for themselves due to their radical innovations in dance, as well as their explicit use of religious motifs. Some dancers, including Ruth St. Denis (1879–1968), who is called the foremother of liturgical dance, even performed for liturgical purposes. From the beginning of the century, this dance practice grew, and networks such as the Sacred Dance Guild emerged, along with the establishment of various schools for liturgical dance where modern dance styles and the principles of the pioneers were integrated into what was deemed appropriate for the liturgy.¹⁷ This new liturgical dances could have enhanced the fervor for a renewed

¹⁵ Cf. the Latin text in PIUS X., Motu proprio *Tra le sollicitudini*, in: Acta Sanctae Sedis 36 (1903–1904) 387–395.

¹⁶ Hugo RAHNER, Man at Play [trans. by Brian BATTERSHAW – Edward QUINN], New York 1972, 67. Cf. Ronald G. GAGNE, Movement in Worship within the Judeo-Christian Tradition, in: ID. et al. (eds.), *Introducing Dance in Christian Worship*, Portland 1999, 12–74, here: 53–56.

¹⁷ For an historical overview of liturgical dance in the 20th century, see John G. DAVIES, *Liturgical Dance. A Historical, Theological and Practical Handbook*, London 1984, 69–81.

liturgical practice that strove for active participation of the entire human being.

This aspiration for liturgical renewal resulted in the Second Vatican Council, which drastically changed the face of the liturgy for the second half of the twentieth century. The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (SC), announced the desired change in direction and emphasized the importance of active participation of lay believers (SC 14). The Church was willing to drastically modify the liturgy to facilitate this participation. Thus, the vernacular was introduced into the liturgy (SC 36), and subsequently, the priest turned to face the congregation instead of focusing on the altar. It also recognized the importance of sacred art (SC 122), and although the Council Fathers did not yet mention sacred or liturgical dance, they did emphasize the importance of the freedom of the human body and the possibility of participating in the liturgy through gestures and bodily attitudes (SC 30).

Despite the momentum that the Vatican Council created, liturgical dance faced significant opposition, preventing it from being recognized as sacred art. In 1975, the Congregation for the Sacraments and Divine Worship published a document in *Notitiae* entitled *La danza nella liturgia*, labeled as an “authoritative clarification” (*una puntualizzazione qualificata e autorevole*) and a definitive statement on the matter. The document advised against the use of dance in Western liturgy, arguing that it is too closely associated with eroticism and the profane, and thus it cannot serve within the sacred sphere of the liturgy.¹⁸ Dance is entirely relegated to the realm of entertainment, or even vulgarity. In response, theologians and canon lawyers have pointed out the historical inaccuracies of the references to condemnations and the patronizing tone the document uses to speak about non-Western practices, which would be suitable for praise. They argue that the intentions of the dancers should be praised, as they seek to contribute to the enhancement of the liturgy with talent and dedication, combating verbose and sometimes even ugly interpretations and

¹⁸ Cf. CONGREGATION OF THE SACRAMENTS AND DIVINE WORSHIP, *La Danza nella liturgia*, in: *Notitiae* 11 (1975) 202–205.

performances.¹⁹ Furthermore, American theologians and bishops advocated for more renewal to further enable active participation and counter the strong tendency to revert to word-centered liturgy that only appeals to the human intellect and not the whole human being.²⁰

Liturgical dancers have found themselves in a precarious position for decades. While the Roman teaching authorities continue to argue against dance, local churches often see opportunities to integrate it into the liturgy. It is remarkable how theologians and dancers have worked over the years to make their understanding of dance accessible for their colleagues and community members. Proponents of liturgical dance even opted to avoid the term “dance” altogether and instead speak of “liturgical gestures” to avoid associations with eroticism, courtship, as well as the irrational and uncontrolled. Consequently, one could argue, they lost touch with artistic developments within the practice of dance. The same theologians opposed for example postmodern dance, which was gaining popularity at the time, seemingly disregarded rhythm and form, and challenging traditional perception of dance. In contrast to artistic postmodern dance, liturgical dance became increasingly restrained.

Moreover, the notion of active participation sharpened the distinction between traditional forms of liturgical dance which tended to value communal dance over technicity and virtuosity and postmodern dance that developed into a conceptual and reflective approach to dance which could be considered intellectual and elitist. Choreographers were encouraged to assist in the integration of dance within faith communities, almost exclusively to increase active participation of the entire assembly. Active participation was thus interpreted as the involvement of all bodies in a democratic dance consisting of gestures and simple movements. Moreover, dance, in every respect, should not distract from the ritual and should not be associated with spectacle.²¹ This form of participation aligned most closely with the wishes of the authorities and beautifully illustrates

¹⁹ See the statement of Frederick R. McManus, in: GAGNE, *Movement in Worship Today*, 58–60.

²⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, 60 f.

²¹ Cf. Susan BAUER, *Dance as Performance Fine Art in Liturgy*, in: Doug ADAMS – Diana APOSTOLOS-CAPPADONA (eds.), *Dancing as Religious Studies*, New York 1993, 167–183, here: 169–176.

the precarious position in which liturgical dance has long found itself, leading to the assumption that this practice is often too amateurish and detracts from liturgical celebrations.

2.2 *Active Participation in Artistic Dance*

During the 1960's, the artistic dance scene also underwent a radical transformation that distinguished modern dance, beloved by liturgical dancers, from postmodern dance. Introduced by the Judson Dance Theater, this postmodern movement challenged the established theatricality of artistic dance and sought to break the fourth wall.²² By introducing everyday movements on stage and considering the presence of the audience, these dancers aimed to present human actions without theatricalizing them. This approach removed dance from the confines of the theater and sought the identity of dance itself. This reflexive and conceptual turn explored the boundaries of notion of "dance". Rudi Laermans describes dance during this period as "a virtual potential of movements and pauses, selectively actualized by historically fluctuating framings of the danceable and, in relation to one such framework, by singular dance works"²³. The choreographer pushed the boundaries of what is danceable, while the audience kept in mind what is recognized as dance. They created a virtual space within which dance moves forward, while also holding space for all the dance that has never been allowed to be.²⁴

Postmodern and conceptual dance turned the spectator into an active interpreter, who, based on personal memories, bodily traces of pain and pleasure, imaginary identifications and rejections, etc., became a co-author or virtual co-choreographer. Laermans states: "The individual spectator is expected to include his own body as a necessary resonance chamber, without the guarantee that every scene will effectively start to pro-

²² See, for example, Yvonne Rainer's first words "No to spectacle" of her famous No Manifesto of 1964: Yvonne RAINER, *On Dance for 10 People and 12 Mattresses Called Parts of Some Sextets*, in: André LEPECKI (ed.), *Dance (Documents of Contemporary Art)*, London 2012, 48.

²³ Cf. Rudi LAERMANS, *Moving Together. Theorizing and Making Contemporary Dance*, Amsterdam 2015, 37.

²⁴ Cf. *ibid.*, 37 f.

duce singular effects within one's own embodied audio-visual archive."²⁵ This new form of dance broke the theatricality of modern dance by allowing the audience to actively participate, giving them the opportunity to recognize themselves in the representation of everyday bodily behavior.²⁶

Recent dance research has brought this participation to the forefront. Laermans speaks of a shift from conceptual dance to collaborative dance, which is deeply rooted in academic structures but seeks more socially engaged forms of co-creative dance.²⁷ Recently, dance has been created within the framework of performance-as-research, where both the process and the product of the dance are central. The dance project creates the opportunity to bring situated embodied knowledge to the surface through interaction with the immediate environment and the audience.²⁸

²⁵ Ibid., 147.

²⁶ Cf. *ibid.*, 152 f.

²⁷ Cf. *ibid.*, 210–212.

²⁸ Dance studies recently align with eco-phenomenology and especially with the theoretical exploration of bodily perception of Merleau-Ponty who states that the body is an intersubjective field of experience, an open form, continually improvising its relation to things and the world. Humans are not always aware of these perceptions of the world which are silent and wordless but ever going. The body is never wholly passive in the event of perception, the sensible world is active and animated to our senses. Cf. Maurice MERLEAU-PONTY, *Primacy of Perception. And Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History and Politics*, ed. by James M. EDIE, n. p. 1964, 49–53. Neurological research also confirms that the humans are active while observing movement in their environment. Movement engages mirror neurons, which seek out familiar movement patterns that the viewer's body has internalized. This translates into neural networks that become stronger as the movements are repeated and practiced. According to Kimerer LaMothe, dancers are the eco-kinetic scholars par excellence, identifying patterns of movement-making, assessing the sensory information, and responding by dedicated action based on their known movement patterns and experiences. They build a kinetic imagination from which they can draw to better understand relationships to their environment and even the divine. Cf. Kimerer LAMOTHE, *As the Earth Dances. A Philosophy of Bodily Becoming*, in: Sondra FRALEIGH (ed.), *Back to Dance Itself. Phenomenologies of the Body in Performance*, Urbana et al. 2018, 123–140, here: 136 f.

This research is not only descriptive but performative, aiming to bring about change in the context in which the research is conducted. It does not aim to map existing networks but explores the breaking points and boundaries of existing relationships to create something new. Dance studies often form alliances with theoretical disciplines such as sociology and cultural studies to study and create these networks, while remaining closely involved within concrete communities.²⁹

2.3 *The Future of Active Participation*

The two currents in dance, artistic dance and liturgical dance, have led to a point where the nature of dance is being intensely questioned. This makes it possible to bridge the gap through theoretical and practical research, which seemed impossible for several decades after the Vatican Council and the renewal of Judson Dance. Due to the conceptual and collaborative turn in dance, the Catholic liturgy and the Christian community are once again on the radar as potential environments for dance research. This research challenges the cautious and narrow interpretation of dance in the liturgy by delving deeper into the networks within which this dance is created. As a result, existing theological frameworks are put under pressure, creating an exciting research environment.

Within Catholic theology, the field of liturgical theology is best suited to contribute to the theoretical and conceptual framing of this new kind of artistic practice-based research. The field is very aware of the necessity for these new approaches as the innovations in liturgy following the Second Vatican Council never sufficiently integrated physicality and beauty. Irwin urges scholars to take this challenge serious as he states that the Council's goal of active participation in liturgy can only be reached as the entire assembly is engaged as human beings, also their bodily senses. Understanding liturgy means more than understanding its texts; it is about experiencing liturgical acts and its aesthetic qualities.³⁰

²⁹ Cf. Annette ARLANDER et al., *Performance as Research. Knowledge, Methods, Impact*, London – New York 2018, 12–16. 37.

³⁰ Cf. Kevin W. IRWIN, *Context and Text. A Method for Liturgical Theology*, Collegeville 2018, xlii–xxvi. 127. 157 f. 414. 499.

Aidan Kavanagh therefore recommends the incorporating methodologies and disciplines that are not strictly theological, such as ritual history and the study of liturgical arts, to do justice to the symbolic, poetic, and kinetic aspects of liturgy. Poets, musicians, and dancers have access to other forms of knowledge that can be utilized to better understand the ritual, he states. This approach requires a form of personal engagement in the liturgy that seems contradictory to classical scientific approaches that prioritize observation.³¹

I propose to incorporate dance as a self-reflective practice that meets the needs of liturgical studies. *OPUS CORPORIS* exemplifies a research-based approach to liturgical theology. As I have argued elsewhere, liturgical dance confronts deep theological tensions—particularly around sacramentality, hierarchy, and the para-sacerdotal role of the dancer. These tensions, often highlighted by critics such as Cardinals Arinze and Ratzinger, reveal the need for new frameworks that allow embodied practices to engage with liturgical tradition without being reduced to spectacle or excluded from sacramental-theological discourse.³² The performance thus serves as a prototype for what I have called an artistic laboratory: a space where dance and theology meet in co-creative inquiry, challenging assumptions and opening new pathways for participation, reflection, and renewal.³³

I prioritize the research on active participation to respond to urgent concerns raised by Cardinal Arinze who has expressed doubts regarding liturgical dance practices, especially when it comes to Western dance interventions in the Latin Mass. These concerns center around the notion of active participation, which Arinze clarifies with the distinction between internal disposition and external bodily attitudes. He states: “all this means that the better and deeper the participation on the part of a person is, the

³¹ Cf. Aidan KAVANAGH, *On Liturgical Theology*. The Hale Memorial Lectures of Seabury-Western Theological Seminary, 1981, New York 1984, 45 f. 142–147.

³² Cf. Joseph CARDINAL RATZINGER, *The Spirit of the Liturgy* [trans. by J. SAWARD], San Francisco 2000, 22–29. 90. 196–202.

³³ Cf. Sander VLOEBERGS, *The Competition for the Sacred Body: The Problem and Potential of Liturgical Dance for the Roman Catholic Church*, in: *Studia Liturgica* 55 (2025) 224–244.

greater the fruit that people will carry away from the liturgy”³⁴. Dance is considered a distraction for most people as it appeals to the external senses and calls for enjoyment, approval and repetition. These kinds of spectacles are better performed in the parish hall or the theater, he claims. Arinze holds on to the argument that dance cannot be accepted because Mass is ultimately a gift from God without human intervention. It is a full participation in the divine mysteries, in which humanity, through Christ, is allowed to participate. Dance should therefore not be used to enliven the external participation, despite the need for active cooperation.³⁵ I argue that a more nuanced view on the relation between (dance) spectacle and active participation is necessary to allow for a deeper understanding of the dynamics between exterior and interior and between divine and human actions within liturgy. Especially the relation between dance art and interior disposition and participation should be reconsidered.

Participation is the central research focus of the liturgical performance project OPUS CORPORIS. By experimenting with the hybrid form of dance performance and Eucharist, a unique situation is created in which active participation is intensively explored. As a dance performance, it considers a dramaturgical direction and aims to capture the audience's attention to enhance the aesthetic experience and influence the interior disposition. Through dance research, a movement vocabulary was sought that meets the needs of the audience/assembly to identify with the dancers. As a ritual and Eucharistic celebration, the assembly uniquely participates in the event by joining in communal prayers, and more significantly, by receiving Communion. How both forms of participation interact, and challenge established assumptions is discussed in the analysis of the performance.

³⁴ Francis CARDINAL ARINZE, *Celebrating the Holy Eucharist*, San Francisco 2006, 55.

³⁵ Cf. *ibid.*, 53–59.

3 *OPUS CORPORIS: Performance Analysis*

3.1 *Preparatory Phase*

OPUS CORPORIS was initially developed at the *KunstKulturKirche Allerheiligen*. The church's mission is to integrate contemporary art into the liturgical space, or even into the liturgy itself. They had previously collaborated with the dance education program in Frankfurt to introduce dance into the liturgy, but the proposed project represented a new step for all parties involved.³⁶

During the preparatory phase I observed different Eucharistic settings in Leuven and Frankfurt. My initial analysis, based on a physical perception and experience made me reflect on the textual script that confines the liturgy within a framework where there is rarely room for physical movements. Additionally, there is limited space for inner stillness, inward movement, and the processing of sensory impressions. The rapid pace of the text means that important liturgical moments pass by quickly, preventing the body from experiencing subtle changes within the ritual and the inner world. Moreover, the restricted repertoire of body postures is used to symbolically support the verbal proceedings but does not allow for spontaneous movement according to one's own interior disposition. The pattern of standing up, sitting down, and, in some cases, kneeling presents an interesting verticality but is not sufficiently utilized because believers do not get the chance, nor have the training, to experience what these changes in body posture bring about. Exterior actions and interior disposition are often not as aligned as theologians would expect.

These observations led to an artistic proposal in which I devised a choreography that respects both the structure and function of the Eucharist as a scripted ritual and honors the moving/dancing body that was

³⁶ The church occasionally invites trainee dancers to perform in the liturgy. I observed two dancers who simultaneously performed solos that were entirely improvised, drawing from popular styles taught in dance schools. They appeared "on stage" at transitional moments in the ritual. Dance and liturgy moved completely independently of each other, and it was unclear what role the dancers assumed within the ritual. Their intervention felt like a brief moment of entertainment that distracted from the liturgical proceedings.

previously burdened by the verbal ballast and unnaturally rapid rhythms of successive textual units. Dance can support active participation by facilitating a movement from an intellectual understanding to a lived experience that also engages the body. The project does not aim for a form of external participation where the community must co-perform certain actions, learn simple dances, or take the initiative to move. On the contrary, it starts from a spectatorship where the congregation finds stillness and watches as dancers and the priest, along with his acolytes and lector, perform the ritual.

This seems to contradict contemporary post-conciliar theology that democratizes the liturgy and activates the assembly. The model of the Eucharist proposed in this project evokes the atmosphere of a Post-Tridentine Latin Mass, characterized by minimal participation from the community and a highly theatrical solo performance by the priest. However, unlike the Latin Mass, our performance is fundamentally collaborative, integrating dance and ritual in a way that invites a different kind of engagement from the assembly. The combination of all the impressions that the spectator receives, expects participation of a different order, the order of interior dispositions, and it is highly authorial. This approach contrasts with the contemporary tendency to provide didactic explanations and theological clarifications for ritual actions, which often diminishes the mystery and engagement of the ritual.³⁷ By requiring the laity to interpret the ritual themselves, the choreography fosters a deeper, more personal connection to the liturgical experience. Dance can assist in this by avoiding the pitfalls of over-explanation. As Laermans points out, this conceptual dance is very engaging and interpretative, and therefore participatory, although this participation is not expressed in standardized actions, gestures, and verbal formulas. By blending the ritual with the social structure of a dance performance, the agreement is confirmed between performers and spectators that they share a collective space throughout the perfor-

³⁷ Cf. GRIMES, *Fictive Ritual*, 37.

mance and embark on a journey together, the outcome of which even the performers cannot fully determine or predict.³⁸

OPUS CORPORIS seeks to develop a new kinetic imagination that aligns with the Eucharist, allowing persons to relate to these new images and movements and participate with their entire being. The dance in OPUS CORPORIS therefore begins with an exploration of existing movement patterns in the liturgy, strengthened by the kinetic connections made by two dancers during improvisation sessions. During improvisation, the dancers seek “embodied metaphors” that go beyond mere representation, aiming instead to experience “to the bone” the profound world of the Eucharistic celebration beyond the rational control, a deep world both metaphorically and utterly real, as Grimes states.³⁹ This imaginative and intuitive exploration of the deep ritual structures and forms aligns with what Kavanagh calls an inward flow, often overlooked by theologians who focus more on symbolic meanings. He states:

Like the current of a mighty river polishing stones and turning wheels by its very movement, the flow of liturgical worship creates in passing, and by the force of its laws, cadence and rhythm and countless other forms and formations, still more important and until now undiscovered, unconsidered, and unnamed.⁴⁰

An exploration of emerging embodied metaphors, inspired by Butoh (a Japanese dance theatre known for its expressive blend of beauty and grotesque), disrupts existing patterns and structures of Christian imagery and calls for the creation of new ones. According to dramaturge Ruth Little, this is inherent to the dramaturgical process. Knowledge is built on the thresholds and edges of experience, where existing certainties and patterns break down.⁴¹ The confrontation with these new deep structures

³⁸ Cf. Guy COOLS, *The Energetic Body* – Antony Gormley, in: ID., *Imaginative Bodies. Dialogues in Performance Practices*, ed. by Lisa M. BOWLER (Antennae Series 22), Amsterdam 2016, 269–288, here: 286.

³⁹ Cf. GRIMES, *Rite out of Place*, 153.

⁴⁰ KAVANAGH, *On Liturgical Theology*, 87 – 88.

⁴¹ Cf. Guy COOLS, *The Meteorological Body* – Ruth Little, in: ID., *Imaginative Bodies. Dialogues in Performance Practices*, ed. by Lisa M. BOWLER (Antennae Series 22), Amsterdam 2016, 241–268, here: 257.

challenges human imagination and prevents the rational mind from quickly forming linguistic constructs. The dance seeks out deeper structures, resulting in movements and sequences that initially appear unrelated to existing imagery, symbols, or narratives. However, these new images and movements evoke very deep centers, they resonate and move the beholder into a sympathetic interaction. In a subsequent step, the choreography integrates these discoveries with culturally determined biblical and liturgical imagery. The intention to respect the existing structure, liturgical metaphors, and formal requirements of the Eucharist created an interesting balancing act, where the dance continually had to reconnect with the ritual. In turn, the ritual provides an anchor and gravitas that grounds the choreography in a shared historical reality spanning generations across time and space.

3.2 Performance Description and Analysis

The performance, held both as an evening show and a Sunday service, began even before the audience/assembly entered the church. The two dancers started by walking along the rounded walls of the church, from the altar towards the entrance. Meeting at the doorway, they then proceeded down the central aisle, tracing an elliptical floor pattern. Their slow, deliberate steps introduced a new rhythm, inviting the churchgoers to feel the earth beneath their feet, to sense the pull of gravity, and to center themselves. As the community settled in, the dancers moved a few rows in and sat on the ground, facing the spectators. They softened their facial expressions and adopted a relaxed, receptive posture. This proximity and the breaking of the fourth wall – a theatrical convention where performers typically remain detached from the audience – challenged the traditional distance between performer and audience. This strategy, known since the advent of postmodern dance, questions the aura of the distant actor by breaking the division between performers and audience. By breaking this invisible barrier, the dancers disrupted the passive role of the spectators, fostering a shared presence and a deeper connection between the community and the performers.

The dancers take their place at the corners of the space behind the altar while the priest and acolytes make their entrance, bowing before the



Figure 2

altar and incensing it – a sophisticated choreography perfected through endless repetition. During this spectacle, the dancers started moving through the altar space. The female dancer wears an elaborate costume, a veil that also hides her face behind long fringes that almost reach the ground. Her appearance initially seems disconcerting. Both dancers fill the space with an ethereal presence, their gentle, minimal movements drawing from the imagination of air and wind that gently move the fragile body and transport it through the space. The veil, on the other hand, brings a material presence that both covers and pulls the body downward. When the priest completes his marking of the sacred space and his opening words, the tone shifts, and the bodies come to a standstill.

The choreography of *OPUS CORPORIS* is divided into four parts that refer to the elements of nature. The performance begins with the element of air, quickly transitioning to the element of water. Throughout the show, a soundscape plays in the background, evolving from ethereal spatial sounds towards deep aquatic tones. This soundscape overpowers the spoken scripts, using echoes of the *Kyrie Eleison* and the *Gloria*. It primarily creates a space where listeners are invited to engage their imagination and physically experience the impact of this sonic environment. Sacred music echoes in the background, reverberating within the space where the



Figure 3

dancers now take center stage. As the priest sits down, the dancers follow a heavy downward movement, like stones sinking into deep water.⁴² The male dancers then move with serpentine, winding motions to reach the veiled dancer, rhythmically lifting her upwards with wave-like movements. When the female dancer stands upright, another dancer ties her fringes back into a braid while she makes an opening gesture, revealing her face to the audience/assembly. Then, the *Gloria* is sung in the foreground, softly acknowledged by the assembly singing along. The dancer follows the braid to the woman's feet and then lies down in a cruciform position. The female dancer sways her hips, invoking biblical women like the

⁴² This movement sequence is influenced by my experience of the *Kyrie*. While the priest moves freely and weightlessly in the altar space, akin a ballerina on stage, the assembly feels restricted in its movement possibilities. The laity cannot match the lightness of the priest from the seated position on the heavy church furniture. To me, it is nearly impossible task to shake of this weighty digestion of guilt as it remains unaddressed as the priest swiftly continues with the liturgy. Hence, *OPUS CORPORIS* uses the serpentine floor movements to move through this labyrinthine pattern towards confession and release.

Samaritan woman and the living water. This passage centers on joy and seduction. Both dancers move with shuffling steps throughout the space, removing the veil completely. Floating over the earth with arms bent in front of the body as if carrying a jug of water, the dancers stop at the lectern where the next part of the ritual will begin.

With the Liturgy of the Word, the next part of the Eucharist begins. OPUS CORPORIS follows the structure of the Eucharist, which consists of a script that is partly repeated weekly and partly varies depending on the liturgical year. Each week, Christians read a different selection of Bible texts, meaning this part of the service looks different during the four performances. Therefore, we chose a radical approach to break away from the rhythm and content dictated by the readings, and the choreography delves deeper into the foundations of the ritual structure surrounding the dogma of the incarnation: the Word made flesh.

To emphasize this, we decided to conduct the readings in silence, asking the lector and the priest to perform all the usual gestures, movements and actions of the Liturgy of the Word wordlessly. The sermon was also delivered in silence, challenging the priest to communicate through his physical presence. This radical intervention directly counters the dominant tendency to focus exclusively on the word – not just the text or the



Figure 4

verbal discourse of the sermon, but the descriptive words that explain the liturgy instead of showing it through actions. Moreover, the texts hold the



Figure 5

listeners in an intellectual stranglehold, constantly asking them to interpret or even analyze the text along with the lector and the priest.

SC 35 affirms the homily as an integral part of the liturgy, intended to explain the mysteries of faith and guide the Christian life. We reinterpreted this moment through silence and physical presence, suggesting that theological insight may also arise from attentiveness, proximity, and relational depth. Rather than relying solely on verbal exposition, the performance invites the assembly to engage with the mystery through shared stillness and embodied attentiveness – expanding the notion of understanding beyond intellectual grasp. Furthermore, it prohibits the substitution of prescribed biblical texts, a norm respected in the performance: the readings remain unchanged, though unspoken. This choice emphasizes the performative and symbolic dimension of proclamation, allowing the Word to resonate through physical presence and movement rather than through speech. In doing so, we challenge the assumption that liturgical comprehension must be verbal, and opens space for theological reflection through non-verbal modes of participation.

In our performance, the readings become a performative act, carried out by embodied persons who appear before their community with a book. Beside them, a slow scene unfolds between the two dancers in abstract, robust costumes that distort the figure of the human body. Very slowly, to a soundscape referencing shifting tectonic plates, the dancers move in a tableau vivant representing life unfolding until the final scene culminates in a reference to the Annunciation, the moment when the Word becomes flesh. This part concludes with the first silence in the soundscape. The word is returned to the priest and the assembly, who together recite the Creed.

The final major part, the Eucharistic service, begins with the preparation of the gifts. The priest bends over the bread and wine, whispering the prayers that bless and present the gifts to God. Meanwhile, the female dancer enters the scene in a new costume. Inspired by an “earth dance”, she circles the altar several times, moving from the hips and chest, with a strong focus on the feet that work the earth. The imagery aims to connect the gifts, the grapes, and the grains that will eventually transubstantiate into the Body of Christ, with the earth that nurtures them. The imagery immediately evokes Mother Earth and the representations of “the feminine”,

which rarely find their way into the symbolic repertoire of the liturgy. The contrast between the free and feminine body and the priestly body, which



Figure 6



Figure 7

at this moment consecrates the gifts, is striking and indicates an interesting tension between the priestly task of both lay believers, represented by the dancer, and the ordained minister. Thus, the dancer shakes her entire body in shocking vertical movements that suggest ecstasy. These moments evoke what I have elsewhere described as the para-sacerdotal role of the dancer. Rather than replacing the priestly function, the dancer's embodied presence opens a space for lay mediation of the sacred, challenging the exclusivity of sacramental authority and inviting a broader understanding of liturgical participation.⁴³

⁴³ Cf. VLOEBERGS, *The Competition*. Also, Carla DeSola describes the dancer as a liturgical leader whose movements can guide the assembly into prayerful presence. Her perspectives suggest that the dancer's role is not merely aesthetic but theological, rooted in an ecstatic contact with the divine as explored in my article. The relationship between ecstatic dance and active participation thus emerges as a promising field of inquiry for future research. See Carla DESOLA, ... *And the Word Became Dance. A Theory and Practice of Liturgical Dance*, in: Dough ADAMS – Diana APOSTOLOS-CAPPADONA (eds.), *Dancing as Religious Studies*, New York 1993, 153–166, here: 156.

The earth dance ends in a standing posture with upward arms, between which the priest visibly continues the ritual. The upward line is calmly and thoughtfully built up and evokes the image of the tree of life. The dance proposes to reflect on our bodies, and the earth in its entirety, as in an upward movement towards the divine, a kind of mystical longing for unity that does not exclude sacramental presence in the gifts but is a necessary support for it. Subsequently, the dancer steps away from the altar, swaying her hips and carrying and reaching out her arms, and the male dancer enters the space in a ribbon costume that barely covers the nakedness of the body and dynamically moves with the fire dance that follows.

The fire dance begins during the Sanctus and naturally refers to the last natural element not yet addressed in the choreography. Yet it also evokes the epiclesis, the invocation of the Holy Spirit to sanctify the gifts. The dance consists of a circle dance with dynamic jumps and curved lines throughout the body. The image of the flames moves through the entire body until it comes to a halt after several circular movements around the altar. The final breath flickers out like a candle flame.

The soundscape, which introduced stirring rhythms during this part, now brings breathing to the forefront. The female dancer stands behind the male dancer, together they stand next to the altar. They use the natural rhythm of breathing to start moving again. This intimate pas de deux transitions from one composition to another, in which the female dancer always provides the foundation, balance, or steady presence. Together they descend to the ground where the male dancer ultimately ends up in the arms of the female dancer, in a clear reference to the Pietà. Meanwhile, the ritual has reached the Lord's Prayer, prayed by the community along with the priest, who now, unusually, faces the altar and speaks to the Father in the same direction as the community. For a second and final time, there is silence in the soundscape. The female dancer begins to sing the Lord's Prayer in Aramaic, Jesus' mother tongue. She sings for the lifeless body in her arms and then for the community, which she leads in her song, a lament and a lullaby. It gives the Church a feminine face, alongside the male representation in the form of the priesthood. After the song, the priest lifts the dancers up, using the gesture of the sign of peace. They follow the priest to gather around the altar with the lector and the acolytes for Communion. When Communion is distributed to the spectators/com-

munity, the dancers follow the priest and then return to the starting position, where they make a half-circle along the walls to end at the portal



Figure 9

where the performance concludes in simplicity, after the priest has pronounced his blessing and the community has given its final response.



Figure 8

3.3 Findings and Theological Discussion

OPUS CORPORIS is an innovative project that integrates liturgical dance as a form of practice-as-research within liturgical theology. Practically, this initiative aims to reflect on and enhance the existing liturgical practice, a goal supported by the Allerheiligenkirche, which initially invested in the project. Theoretically, the performance, presented as liturgy, provokes profound questions about fundamental aspects of worship. Dance and dance research are employed to challenge and explore the assumptions and theoretical frameworks of liturgical practices.

OPUS CORPORIS was showcased at two distinct events: a series of four performances in Frankfurt in June 2022, and a single performance in December 2024 at BAC Art Lab Leuven. Both events involved collaboration with theological faculties, inviting students and professors to attend the performances and engage in discussions with the creators. In addition to the performances, two artist talks were held, and in Leuven, a series of lectures was integrated into two courses for students who at-

tended the performance. The following discussion summarizes key observations and insights that emerged from these engagements.

A key point in the discussion is the nature of the liturgical dance performance, which pushes the boundaries of what previously seemed possible. This inevitably provokes some anxious reactions. As an artistic intervention, significant changes are made to the existing liturgy of the Eucharist, which theologians and liturgists would not easily undertake. In a sense, *OPUS CORPORIS* is a process of ritualization, as described by Grimes, and it has the same destabilizing effect, as the intervention in the liturgy penetrates to the core of Catholicism.⁴⁴ Processes or ritualization are not safe and challenge the liturgical rite which is focused on stabilizing by protecting its core symbols to counter doubt and ambivalence that constantly arise in even the strongest rites. It utilizes symbols, formulas, movements, and postures that contains the community's encounter with the divine within a safe environment. In Western culture, art, particularly drama and literature, has taken on the task of criticizing rites and facilitating processes of ritualization. They create new ritual forms which are deviant and often ironically invert the rituals they critique. These fictive rituals are closer to the idea of make-believe and like fiction, they require a suspension of disbelief, as ritual actions are not literally real. This does not mean false, but rather meta-real, reality-inducing, and world-making, just as fictional characters and worlds have a real effect on the reader. This thought leads to the realization that every ritual is, in a sense, made, which can be a dangerous realization for believers, Grimes argues.⁴⁵

OPUS CORPORIS is an artistic ritualization based on the Eucharist, which is both theatrically constructed and formally reproduced, respecting the inherited scripts and the theological claims of the real presence of God. The dance performance has the potential to become a "real" Eucharistic celebration. It is therefore not surprising that some students

⁴⁴ The fact that *OPUS CORPORIS* could be developed and presented, even subsidized by church authorities, indicates a certain dissatisfaction within church communities with the current state of the liturgy.

⁴⁵ Cf. GRIMES, *Fictive Ritual*, 19. 36–63. 130. The rites Grimes discusses in his analysis are derived from literary works; hence they are never truly enacted. In a way, they are more easily experienced as fictive than the theatrical performance which feels, in a sense, very real.

were concerned about the catholicity of the project before the performance began, even calling it potentially blasphemous. The fear of blasphemy indicates a fear of possible disruption in the “correct” and normative way of performing worship. This fear requires a thorough theological analysis. The hybrid form created by this liturgical dance performance destabilizes both the experience of the faithful in the existing liturgy and the hierarchy that shapes it.

This uncertainty creates a sense of insecurity, which is precisely where the communication and experience of the sacred is allowed to occur. Kavanagh argues that the physical experience of divine presence in the ritual is hindered by the fixation on scripture and printed texts, which only intellectually challenge individuals and establish a safe control, whereas the experience should be fearsome and risky. The living, real presence of God is experienced during the Eucharist, and participation in this life at its most intense degree occurs during this ritual. A genuine experience of this presence inevitably involves chaos and the obscure, as it transcends our rational control and permeates our entire being. True active participation implies a loss of control and an entry into the unknown. The liturgy has taught us to avoid these experiences and often fails to describe and interpret this physical reality.⁴⁶ He writes:

This is why they frighten the altar guild. That it never crossed our minds that a liturgy or an icon should cause us to shiver only shows how we have allowed ourselves to tame the Lion of Judah and put him into a suburban zoo to entertain children.⁴⁷

During the theological discussions following the Leuven performance, some students shared that they viewed the Eucharist as one of the few certainties in the chaos of contemporary life. This sentiment contrasts with Kavanagh’s theological perspective that the ritual should not cater to desires for certainty. Students questioned whether rituals and their forms are responsible for providing a safe encounter with the chaotic presence of a Living God. There is a thin line between creating a safe environment and attempting to control the divine. This performance shifts the focus

⁴⁶ KAVANAGH, *On Liturgical Theology*, 73 f. 119–125.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, 94.

towards opening the enclosed space through a transgressive intervention, fostering much-needed renewal and offering an opportunity for spiritual growth and exploration of the interior disposition.

OPUS CORPORIS does not view doubt as a problem but rather as an essential part of the artistic and religious experience. Uncertainty and ambiguity of meaning are crucial elements in experiencing art. Doubt is a form of participation in the artistic event. Spectators are invited to immerse themselves and give meaning to the movements in the dance. I extend this thought to the ritual. Is questioning and doubting the Eucharist and the ritual not a form of active participation? Should believers conform to the script of the Mass without any resistance or hesitation? Each believer is responsible for engaging with the ritual, not just intellectually understanding the structure and language of the Eucharist. One might ask whether the mystery, chaos, and incomprehensibility of the ritual should be more prominent. This idea contrasts with the popular approach of making the liturgy intellectually accessible to increase participation. However, this lowers the aesthetic and spiritual bar and underestimates the true charisma of community members due to the bias of intellectually trained theologians and church authorities.⁴⁸

The experience of doubt during the liturgical performance can be related to the perceived malleability of the ritual that allows for human ingenuity that questions the status quo and reflects on the core issues at stake in a time of rapid transitions. It points at the participant's responsibility to discover the interior disposition which is an integral component of the active participation. The theological emphasis on active participation

⁴⁸ Kavanagh states that the ordinary magisterium, the entire community of believers, has been increasingly weakened in favor of strengthening the extraordinary magisterium associated with papal, episcopal, and conciliar pronouncements on doctrine and discipline. With the introduction of print-outs and accompanying texts, the emphasis has often shifted to the text directed by theologians, easily fitting under ecclesiastical law administered through centralized bureaucratic offices of church government. The liturgy becomes a playground and a space where theology is taught and applied from above. As a result, the community becomes more passive, the ministries more learned, and the sermons more erudite. The spoken word replaces the kinetic art of ritual, turning the faithful into mere listeners. Cf. *ibid.*, 115–118.

entails acknowledging that all human faculties, perceptions and emotions are allowed to participate and co-create the liturgical event. To allow this process to take root, one needs to deal with potential obstructions caused by restrictive scripts and show an alternative (made-up) reality which mirrors the traditional Eucharistic service.

The main strategy to achieve this goal is to submerge the verbal structure of the Eucharist in a sonic and kinesthetic alternative universe that captures the essences of the ritual and challenge customs and prejudices. Most notably, the silent readings of the Service of the Word, accompanied by a soundscape and a still dance, surprised many spectators and left some theologians speechless, considering it the most radical aspect of the performance. Participants are invited to watch rather than listen. Some were unsure how to handle the silence. The community is so accustomed to “listening” that they forget their fundamental participation in the Eucharist. Through the silence, and through the dance in general, the rhythm of the ritual is slowed down, drawing attention to the actions that are undertaken. It confronts the community with the meaningful elements of the Eucharist, which in a verbose culture are often blurred by didactic and theological explanations. This intervention asks the spectator to give meaning to the actions taking place and to be critical based on their own bodily experience of what they see.

The familiar liturgical form surfaces at certain moments. At other times, participants primarily experience the dance, while the traditional liturgy unfolds in the background, weakening the established rhythm and control. Disruption occurs when the community attempts to participate in the ritual in the usual manner, such as reciting the correct formulas or standing and sitting at the appropriate times. This disruption was particularly noticeable during the second performance in Leuven, which took place in an art center. Unlike the audience in Frankfurt, which largely consisted of members of the faith community who collectively followed the liturgical script, the audience in Leuven was mainly composed of theology students and art enthusiasts. From the beginning of the performance, the Leuven audience chose not to participate in the liturgical script. It is interesting to note that peer pressure was a significant reason for not publicly participating in the ritual and only observing. As a result, the faithful lost the element of external participation they were accustomed to. This led to

confusion and doubt about their role in the ritual, and even about the nature and reality of the ritual itself. The dance submerges the Eucharist and brings it to an unprecedented depth.



Figure 10

Moreover, the faithful in this performance bear the responsibility not only to interpret and question but also to keep the script of the liturgy alive, even in precarious situations such as an art event. Comparing the two contexts – the ecclesiastical setting in Frankfurt and the artistic context in Leuven – reveals a difference in active participation in the ritual by the community. This difference is not attributable to the performance itself, which was identical in both locations, but to the audience and the environment in which they found themselves. The believers in the audience/assembly are responsible for maintaining and applying the liturgy in its familiar form, as they have repeated this performance weekly. They are asked to improvise within this new form, actively participating and deepening their experience. This form of ritualization aims to negotiate sacramental and hierarchical power relations by making believers not just spectators but also responsible for determining, through their lived experience, how they best engage with the Church and God within liturgy.

The existing form of the liturgy does not need to be rejected in favor of artistic or theological experimentation; on the contrary. The experiment is only successful because it can relate to an existing tradition and a community of believers who dutifully keep the script of the liturgy alive. The liturgy is an organism that grows from existing roots and develops in relation to an ever-changing environment. Dance suggests which potentials remain unfulfilled in the existing liturgy and offers alternatives to achieve true active participation from all members of the community.

The practice-based research of OPUS CORPORIS demands a further exploration of an innovative theoretical framework that can deepen the discussion about improvisation and adaptability of the liturgy to the changing environment, to create a safe environment that allows for active participation and exploration of the inner disposition. Improvisation seems to be a useful category to discuss the liturgical dance event. Samuel Wells used it to discuss Christian ethics, borrow the term from theater where it is considered a practice through which actors seek to develop trust in themselves and each other so they can conduct unscripted dramas. Like theater groups, church communities need this skill of trust and this discipline of training, rehearsing and repeating Scriptures to develop habits to embody the tradition in new and often challenging circum-

stances.⁴⁹ Liturgical dance urges the congregation to take this improvisation serious and to avoid a mechanical repetition of the script, which in Tim Ingold's analysis of the craft, would lead to a progressive loss of conscious awareness or concentration – what I would call active participation.⁵⁰

Improvisation is an important skill for all participants who become (liturgical) theologians in their own right, and practice what Sarah Coakley calls *théologie totale*. Inspired by patristic and ascetic theology she envisions a theology in via, supported by bodily and spiritual practices and tasked with undoing and redoing itself in response to shifting events and visions that emerge from darkening the mind and reorienting the senses to reach contemplation with epistemic and spiritual deepening. This theology fundamentally changes and shapes the theologian, as well as the discipline.⁵¹ Liturgical theology would be enriched by these improvisations performed by the entire assembly in which all persons carry theological responsibility. Like Coakley, I, together with David Fagerberg, propose to look at asceticism within the liturgical monastic culture. Its pneumatic organism and its charismatic tradition can inspire believers, in complement to the sacramental and hierarchical structure of the church, to reach a fullness of liturgical life in which all members of the assembly participate to the greatest extent. Through ascetic practice, the church tradition and especially the monastic communities, searched for a freedom of both body and spirit and for the restoration of a cosmological priesthood of all believers, joining creation in a prelapsarian praise for God.⁵²

Liturgical dancers can lead the way in these embodied explorations within the liturgical and ascetic context. Dance fulfills a monastic role: it introduces a charismatic presence within liturgy that challenges existing

⁴⁹ Cf. Samuel WELLS, *Improvisation. The Drama of Christian Ethics*, Grand Rapids 2004, 11 f.

⁵⁰ Cf. Tim INGOLD, *Being Alive. Essays on Movement, Knowledge and Description*, London – New York 2011, 75.

⁵¹ Cf. Sarah COAKLEY, *God, Sexuality and the Self. An Essay "On the Trinity"*, New York 2013, here: 46.

⁵² Cf. David W. FAGERBERG, *On Liturgical Asceticism*, Washington, DC 2013, 10–13. 157 f.

structures to relearn improvisational skills, based on an intense and ongoing bodily practice that informs its theology. The choreographer/dancer introduces an entirely new role into the existing order, thereby potentially breaking through the established power structures. In *OPUS CORPORIS* this disruption and enrichment of the hierarchical-sacramental order is enacted especially in the performance of the female dancer who joins the priest in a mutual preparation of the gifts. How natural and especially feminine imaginaries, for example within the monastic and mystical traditions, might enhance the liturgical repertoire and support the dance and body theology practiced within the liturgy, is only one of the promising directions that these liturgical dance studies can take.



Figure 11

Images

Photographer: Nikolaus Kockel

Dancers: Sander Vloebergs, Katrien Vanderbeke

Priest: Stefan Scholz

Lector: Andreas Wörsdörfer

Costumes: Lukas Sünder

Video & Photo Gallery:

<https://artistictheologylab.com/opus-corporis-a-liturgical-body-work-project> 

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