Global Review of Humanities, Arts, and Society (GRHAS) Vol. 1, No. 2, 2025 | pp. 103–113

DOI: https://doi.org/10.63802/grhas.v1.i2.28

Presenting Presence: A Study on the Application of Pina Bausch's Question-Based Choreographic Method in Dance Creation

Xin Duan[1]*, Bing Yan[1]

[1]*Kookmin University Email*

Abstract

As a seminal figure in Tanztheater (dance theatre), Pina Bausch brought about a fundamental shift in choreographic thinking—from the reproduction of movement to the presentation of presence. This paper examines her "question-based choreographic method" as an entry point to explore the philosophical underpinnings and artistic practices behind her creative approach.

By analyzing the structural language and bodily expressions in Bausch's representative works, the study traces how she grounded choreography in the personal experiences of dancers, using questions to provoke embodied responses. This process led to the construction of fragmented and non-linear stage structures that deeply reveal human emotions, memory, and existential conditions.

Furthermore, the paper argues that Bausch's choreographic logic holds significant implications for contemporary dance-making. It offers critical insights into reconfiguring dancer subjectivity, expanding the language of movement, and fostering collaborative creation, thus demonstrating enduring relevance and theoretical value in today's artistic context.

Keywords: Pina Bausch; Interrogative Choreography; Existential Philosophy; Dance Creation

1. Introduction

In the context of contemporary dance creation, the traditional choreographic logic of "representation" is gradually being replaced by a "presentation-oriented" creative approach. This transformation is not merely reflected in the ways movements are generated, but more significantly indicates a reconstruction of

*Corresponding Author: Xin Duan (290359401@qq.com)

choreographic consciousness. The focus has shifted from movement composition centred on visual aesthetics and formal structure to a multilayered expression of personal experience, bodily emotion, and existential state—an important trend that merits attention in the current field of choreography.

Within this transition, the German choreographer Pina Bausch stands as a figure of iconic significance. Her artistic proposition, "I'm not interested in how people move, but in what moves them," directly addresses the essential relationship between dance and the human being, redefining the dynamics among choreographer, dancer, and the work itself. Bausch disengaged dance creation from the formal language of movement, and redirected it towards a concern for "being"—revealing, through the body, the individual's genuine emotions, memories, dilemmas, and desires. In doing so, dance becomes an art form that explores the condition of being human, serving as a medium for concretely investigating existence.

In her creative practice, Bausch's method of *question-based choreography*, characterised by the core mechanism of "question–response–collage–construction," provides a tangible manifestation of the logic of presenting existence. Rather than prescribing a movement vocabulary, Bausch posed open-ended questions to her dancers, prompting them to recall life experiences and access inner emotions, allowing movements to emerge instinctively from the body. This method not only activated the dancer's subjectivity, but also transformed the choreographic process from a one-directional execution of instructions into a co-creative mechanism centred on individual experience. Beyond its practical application, this method embodies a profound existentialist philosophy: the dancer's movement is no longer a representation of formal language, but a corporeal response to the condition of existence—a concrete expression of how one "becomes oneself" within a given context. In this sense, question-based choreography aligns closely with existentialist thought: each movement becomes a bodily answer to the fundamental question "Why do I move?", reflecting the philosophical proposition that *existence precedes essence*. This co-creative model not only alters the way works are generated, but also opens new possibilities for dance to approach and express authentic human existence.

Understanding dance as a *presentation of existence* also entails a loosening of traditional structural logic. In Bausch's works, linear narrative and unified vocabulary are often abandoned. Instead, a non-linear, collage-like structure organises fragmented responses from dancers into a collective sensory text. Dance no longer tells a singular story; rather, it reveals the multiple layers of human condition through juxtaposed bodily fragments and emotional states. Non-linearity thus becomes an effective method of presenting *multiple states of being*, shifting the audience's role from interpreting narrative to resonating with bodily experience.

Notably, this creative logic is grounded in a profound

philosophy of the body. In Bausch's choreographic world, the body is not merely a tool of expression, but a container of emotion and memory—a manifestation of individual existence through experience. The body responds to questions and constructs meaning through these responses, with each movement bearing strong personal imprints, rejecting standardisation or rigid templates. This approach maximises the expressive potential of the body as a *truthful being*. By activating *bodily memory*, dance is liberated from narrative dependency and instead becomes a space of emotional flow and individual revelation. Through bodily language, the dancer conveys not just movement, but traces of time, the temperature of lived experience, and the complexity of life itself.

The logic of *presenting existence* in dance mirrors philosophical inquiries into existence. In phenomenology and existentialist philosophy, existence is not an abstract essence but an embedded, perceivable, and situated reality. Bausch's choreography exemplifies this view: the body in her works does not seek aesthetic idealisation or symbolic abstraction, but rather reveals how it suffers, remains silent, experiences joy, and yearns in the everyday. Each movement is driven by the dancer's authentic being, becoming a *trace of existence*. Thus, her dance is not merely an art of movement, but a philosophical statement of embodied being—an invocation on stage of the fundamental questions "Who am I?" and "How do I exist?"

Based on this, the present article takes *presentation of existence* as its central theme, focusing on the choreographic mechanisms constructed through Pina Bausch's question-based method. It examines how she mobilises dancer subjectivity, activates bodily memory, and deconstructs linear structure to achieve a multidimensional presentation of existential states. The aim is to clarify the core concepts embedded in Bausch's choreographic logic and to explore its deeper impact on conceptions of dance, offering theoretical insights and practical pathways for contemporary choreographers.

This research adopts a methodology combining literature review and analysis of representative works. It primarily references Bausch's creative interviews, biographical literature, and dance video documentation. The analysis is grounded in official high-definition stage recordings released by Tanztheater Wuppertal, including *The Rite of Spring*, *Café Müller*, and *Wiener Abend*. While no direct citations from choreographic notes are included, the study draws upon dancer interviews and rehearsal documentation to indirectly reconstruct her creative approach. Starting from the philosophical proposition of *presenting existence*, the article focuses on the release of dancer subjectivity, transformation of bodily experience, and construction of non-linear structures to explore how this method contributes to conceptual shifts in contemporary dance

creation. The significance of this research lies in three aspects: firstly, it offers a new perspective for understanding how dance can transcend the limits of "movement" as such; secondly, it provides theoretical support for choreographers seeking methods rooted in personal experience and bodily authenticity; and thirdly, it situates dance creation within a philosophical framework of existence, fostering a deeper dialogue between dance studies and interdisciplinary theory.

In conclusion, Pina Bausch's choreographic logic exemplifies a deeply embodied philosophical thinking. It not only redefines the mechanisms by which movement is generated, but also rearticulates the fundamental question of *what dance is*. This article, guided by the logic of "from representation to presentation," undertakes a systematic investigation of Bausch's creative philosophy under the core issue of "existential expression," and seeks to explore the value and significance of this paradigmatic shift within the contemporary dance-making context.

2. Pina Bausch's Choreographic Thought and Her Question-Based Method of Creation

In the latter half of the twentieth century, Pina Bausch redefined the landscape of European dance with her distinctive concept of *Tanztheater* (dance theatre), breaking the boundaries between classical ballet and modern dance. Under her vision, dance was no longer merely a showcase of technique and form; it became a powerful means to explore human emotion and the condition of existence. At the heart of her choreographic philosophy lies the human being—emphasising the dancer's individual experience and bodily memory, and advocating for dance to faithfully present the complexity of emotional life and the authenticity of lived experience. This philosophy not only reshaped the expressive dimension of dance works, but also established a deeply humanistic logic for contemporary choreographic practice.

Bausch's creative shift originated in her profound reflection on traditional choreographic methods. Although she received rigorous training in both ballet and modern dance, she gradually became aware that such highly codified, form-driven systems often failed to access the inner emotional truths and psychological states of the individual. Conventional choreography prioritised precision in executing movement but overlooked the unique value of personal experience in stage performance. As American dance theorist Susan Leigh Foster has noted, "The body is both the product and producer of culture; dancers not only display movement but also generate meaning." This insight underscores the agency of the body in creative processes and offers a theoretical foundation for Bausch's emphasis on the dancer's lived experience as a central creative force.

In her practice, this philosophy gradually evolved into

DOI: https://doi.org/10.63802/grhas.v1.i2.28

a distinctive methodology known as **question-based choreography**. Beginning with open-ended questions rather than prescribed movements or stylistic templates, this method encouraged dancers to respond physically and emotionally from their own experiences. Bausch would pose emotionally charged questions around specific themes—for example: *What is your deepest fear?*, *When have you felt most profoundly alone?*, *How do you express desire with your body?* These questions did not imply any fixed movement vocabulary, nor did they anticipate a unified response. Instead, they guided dancers to translate their inner emotional worlds into visible movement, producing dance expressions that were deeply personal and charged with authentic presence.

At its core, question-based choreography represents a highly **democratic and decentralised** mode of creation. It redefined the relationship between choreographer and dancer, transforming what had typically been a top-down structure into a collaborative and generative process. Within this framework, the dancer is no longer a passive executor of instructions, but an active co-creator of content. The dancer's language, bodily reactions, behavioural habits, and personal traits are all recognised as vital creative resources and become organic components of the stage text. This mechanism not only unleashes the dancer's creative agency but also expands the expressive capacity of dance, enabling it to embody more nuanced, complex emotional and conceptual layers.

The works produced through this method also display structural characteristics distinct from those of traditional theatre. Rather than following linear narratives or logically sequenced developments, Bausch often employed a **collage-like, fragmented** form of expression. Her pieces typically consist of numerous independent yet interconnected segments, constructed through the layering of emotion, repetition of imagery, and stark contrasts in physical movement. This non-linear, open-ended dramaturgy reflects the fragmented and multifaceted nature of contemporary lived experience and offers audiences greater interpretive freedom. Viewers are thus invited not to decode a fixed storyline, but to actively construct meaning through resonance with the performed bodies.

Moreover, question-based choreography carries a **deeply embodied philosophical implication**. The body is not merely an expressive instrument, but a vessel of memory and emotion—a totality of one's history and perceptual existence. Within this logic, bodily movement is no longer subordinate to visual aesthetics, but is charged with the responsibility of exposing individual experience and interrogating existential condition. As French philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty asserted, "The body is not an object one possesses; it is the extension of consciousness itself." Bausch's emphasis on the dancer's bodily experience precisely reflects this phenomenological stance, positioning the

body as a medium through which meaning is produced and the self is revealed. In this way, dance transcends formal aesthetics and becomes a mode of ontological inquiry.

Bausch's choreographic vision also reflects a **socially engaged artistic stance**. By inviting dancers from diverse cultural backgrounds and life experiences into her creative process, she transformed dance into a collective dialogue of multiple life-worlds. In her work, the body is both personal and social—witnessing and transmitting the intricate dynamics of human relationships. The dancers' responses are drawn not only from personal memory, but also reflect the ways in which social and cultural contexts shape bodily experience. Dance thus ceases to be merely an artistic presentation; it becomes a socially situated act—an embodied public narrative of *who we are*, *how we feel*, and *how we express*.

In summary, Pina Bausch's **question-based method** constitutes not merely a technical innovation in choreography, but a profound artistic and anthropological rethinking of dance. Through this method, she achieved a fundamental shift from formal aesthetics to existential philosophy—transforming dance into an art form mediated by emotion, spoken through the body, and shaped by individual experience. In this process, the dancer is no longer a passive performer, but an excavator of experience, a generator of meaning, and a participant in socio-cultural discourse. The establishment of this method marks a transition towards a practice of dance-making that is more humanistic, structurally open, and socially engaged—offering a rich theoretical resource and practical model for contemporary performance art.

3. Analysing the Structural Language of "Presenting Existence": Case Studies from Pina Bausch's Representative Works

Pina Bausch's choreographic works vividly embody the concept of *presenting existence*. Rejecting traditional linear narrative and unified movement systems, she instead adopted non-linear, fragmented structures and multiple bodily languages to expose the complexity and diversity of human emotion. This structural language not only reflects her redefinition of the nature of dance, but also reveals her distinctive ways of organising stage space, temporal rhythm, and corporeal imagery. This chapter will analyse several of her seminal works to examine how, through the logic of question-based choreography, Bausch transforms individual experience into concrete stage expression—thus visualising and theatricalising *existence*.

Let us begin with *Café Müller* (1978), widely regarded as a concentrated expression of Bausch's creative philosophy. The staging is strikingly minimal: a few chairs and tables, a door, dim lighting, and near-silent

music make up the performance space. Yet the emotional intensity is overwhelming. In this work, Bausch herself performed on stage, slowly navigating the space with her eyes closed—a vulnerable yet resolute embodiment of perseverance. This unseen walking originated from a question she posed to her dancers: *How do you continue moving forward in your most helpless moment?* The dancer's body ceases to function as a vehicle for virtuosic display; it becomes a vessel for emotional transmission. In the silent collisions and repeated falls, the audience witnesses human struggle and dependency.

Structurally, *Café Müller* eschews conventional dramatic arcs and instead progresses through alternating emotional fragments and repeated actions. The audience is not guided by logical plot, but drawn into an emotional flow. This fragmented structure enhances the immediacy of emotional transmission, transforming the stage into a *site of feeling* rather than a narrative platform. Bausch frequently employs this non-narrative, asymmetrical method to disrupt audience expectations, allowing each movement segment to stand as an independent annotation of a particular existential state.

Consider next *Vollmond* (Full Moon, 2006), one of Bausch's late works. A massive rock and a pool of water occupy the centre of the stage. Dancers run, fall, shout, kiss, and splash water—engaging in a series of "bodily events" that merge everyday behaviour with heightened emotion. Though the piece lacks a defined theme, it is suffused with vitality and an outpouring of desire. Bausch asked her dancers: *How do you completely let go in the rain at night?* Their bodily responses generated numerous dynamic movement fragments. Water serves not only as a visual spectacle but as a symbol of life's uncontrollability, fluidity, and primal nature, producing a sensory and psychological impact.

Vollmond continues Bausch's collage-based structure: rather than revolving around a single event, the piece comprises the juxtaposition and interaction of dancers' bodily memories and personal movement languages. Far from diminishing cohesion, this structure creates a layered emotional landscape with rhythmic vitality. Audiences can encounter states of human being in any given moment. This approach reflects Bausch's core creative belief: the stage is a space for the coexistence of diverse life experiences, not a place that demands narrative unity—but rather, one that values authenticity.

Beyond emotional and structural treatment, Bausch's use of **everyday actions** is a key component of her structural language. Actions such as washing, eating, putting on shoes, combing hair, embracing, and fighting are frequently deconstructed, exaggerated, or repeated. Through this process, they are lifted out of their everyday context and invested with symbolic significance. In *Bluebeard* (1977), for example, a dancer

repeatedly turns a tape recorder on and off, replaying a man's narration of the *Bluebeard* tale. This is accompanied by repeated gestures and vocal reactions from the dancers. The obsessive repetition of these actions externalises the emotional entanglement between listener and voice, exposing deeper anxieties and power dynamics in human relationships.

These repetitive actions are not mechanical reproductions. They are constantly varied in rhythm, spatial arrangement, and relational context, with each iteration revealing subtle differences that invite the audience to perceive the latent meanings embedded in movement. Bausch elevates such *non-technical* gestures into components of her dance language, liberating dance from the confines of formal aesthetics and establishing an open, complex, and anthropologically rich performance space.

In sum, Pina Bausch's representative works exhibit several defining features in their structural language. First, they employ a **non-linear, collage-based structure**, with emotional logic as the organising principle. Second, they **integrate highly everyday actions**, with movement generation rooted in personal memory and bodily experience. Third, they **rely on question-based prompts** to elicit subjective expression from dancers, constructing a co-creative stage space. Together, these features converge on the core theme of *presenting existence*: dance ceases to be a representation of reality and becomes a truthful revelation of lived experience, emotional turmoil, and existential condition.

In Bausch's dance, the stage becomes a site where existence is seen. Each dancer is not a performer in the traditional sense, but a narrator whose language is the body. Her structural language thus transcends conventional movement paradigms and develops a more open, polysemous, and human-centred vocabulary—one that has had a lasting impact on contemporary choreographic practice.

This analysis draws primarily from official stage recordings of *Café Müller*, *Vollmond*, and *Bluebeard* released by Tanztheater Wuppertal, supplemented by dancer interviews and rehearsal documentaries. Through close audiovisual analysis, this chapter reconstructs, as faithfully as possible, the creative logic and existential framework underpinning Bausch's question-based choreography.

4. Conclusion

The *Tanztheater* pioneered by Pina Bausch represents not merely an innovation in performance form, but a fundamental shift in choreographic logic. Grounded in her central belief—*"I'm not interested in how people move, but in what moves them"*—Bausch dismantled the traditional choreography model centred on movement structures, returning dance to its human essence: a space for expressing emotion, experience, relationships, and existence. This conceptual transformation has inspired countless choreographers and performers on a methodological level and reshaped

understandings of the ontology of dance itself.

This study has taken *presenting existence* as its key term, systematically analysing Bausch's choreographic thinking and her question-based method. It has focused on the unique characteristics of her work in terms of structure, bodily language, spatial organisation, and aesthetic principles. The analysis shows how Bausch constructed a dance language system that is pluralistic, open-ended, and grounded in authenticity—achieved through fragmentary structures, the transformation of everyday actions, and a co-creative approach involving dancers as active contributors. Her dance is neither a representation of life nor a pursuit of beauty, but an artistic capture and presentation of the *human condition*.

First, from a methodological perspective, Bausch's question-based choreography serves as a core mechanism for *making existence visible*. By posing open-ended, experience-driven life questions, the choreographer partially transfers creative authority to the dancer, who responds through the body based on personal life experience. As such, dance movements are no longer pre-determined forms, but natural emanations of individual states of being. This transformation—from action that is *seen* to being that is *made visible*—is central to understanding how dance visualises existence. It breaks down the binary between creator and executor, positioning each dancer as a *speaker of existence*.

Second, in terms of structure, Bausch abandoned linear narratives and the conventional build-up of dramatic climaxes, instead employing collage and repetition as core organising methods. She emphasised non-logical associations between movement, space, and sound, encouraging the audience to engage with emotional rather than narrative content. This non-narrative structure renders the dance work more open to interpretation, allowing each audience member to project their own emotions and build personal meaning, thereby generating an experience based on empathy and resonance.

Third, in her use of bodily language, Bausch placed high value on everyday behaviours, non-technical movement, and the authenticity of bodily response. She continually explored the possibilities between what *can* and *cannot* be danced, transforming actions such as crying, embracing, falling, or remaining silent into powerful stage expressions. This treatment of bodily language breaks down the elitist boundaries of technical dance, bringing the art form closer to real, shared human experiences and emotions, and thereby enhancing its emotional reach and universality.

For contemporary choreographers, Bausch's *question-based method* and core principle of *presenting existence* offer more than a practical methodology—they amount to a declaration of choreographic philosophy. The methodological value lies in its *applicability, adaptability,* and *transferability*.

Contemporary creators may draw from their own cultural and social contexts to pose their own existential questions, thereby encouraging dancers to generate movement from within. This gives rise to a co-creative mechanism driven by experience, producing movement and constructing meaning in a processual loop. Such a model can be effectively applied in various formats, including improvisation, community dance, and physical theatre, demonstrating wide potential for practical adoption.

Of course, Bausch's method also presents certain challenges. Its heavy reliance on the dancer's personal experience and emotional investment requires a high level of psychological maturity and creative agency. Likewise, the open structure of her works may cause some audience members to feel distanced or overwhelmed by an excess of information. These issues remind us that applying Bausch's approach requires sensitive adaptation to specific creative contexts—it is not to be mimicked mechanically but reinterpreted organically.

Overall, Pina Bausch, through her profound artistic philosophy and innovative creative pathway, has opened up a new possibility for contemporary dance creation—one that begins with the human and returns to *being*. Her question-based choreography expands the expressive potential of dance and redefines the role of the creative subject. The chain of logic—*question–response–revelation*—represents a realistic path for contemporary dance to return to its essence, generate empathy, and move toward diverse expressions. In today's artistic landscape, where relationships among self and body, experience and expression, stage and audience are under constant re-examination, Bausch's creative logic continues to offer enduring theoretical value and practical vitality.

References

Chen, R. (2025). *"An Hour with Heidegger": Tezuka Tomio and the cross-cultural dialogue of existentialism*. Mass Art, (1), 88–90. https://doi.org/10.20112/j.cnki.ISSN1007-5828.2025.01.030

Climenhaga, R. (2008). *Pina Bausch*. Routledge.

Gong, X. (2021). *Artistic features of Tanztheater: A study of Pina Bausch*. Theatre Home, (29), 32–33.

Jiang, Q. (2024). *The dilemma and paradox of "existence": A retrospective existentialist reading of Shakespearean tragedy*. Journal of Sichuan Vocational and Technical College, 34(6), 145–151, 156. https://doi.org/10.13974/j.cnki.51-1645/z.2024.06.026

Kim, B. (2022). *Reconsidering ecological citizenship (gender) from the perspective of the material/ontological turn. Journal of the Korean Association of Regional Geographers*, 28(1), 133–150.

Kirchman, K. (2012). The totality of the body: An essay on Pina Bausch's aesthetic. In R. Climenhaga (Ed.), *The Pina Bausch Sourcebook* (pp. 288–299). Routledge.

Kong, G. (2024). *Pina Bausch's choreography and the concept of "everyday life": A case study*. Dance Appreciation, (22), 53–55.

Liang, J. (2022). *The inspiration of Pina Bausch's Tanztheater*. Tian Nan, (1), 5–6.

Ma, C. (2023). *Bodily language and cultural logic in Pina Bausch's Tanztheater*. Chinese Literary and Art Criticism, (1), 100–112, 128. https://doi.org/10.19324/j.cnki.zgwypl.2023.01.004

Manning, S. (2010). Pina Bausch 1940–2009. *TDR: The Drama Review*, 54(1), 10–13.

Siegmund, G. (2018). Doing the contemporary: Pina Bausch as a conceptual artist. *Dance Research Journal*, 50(2), 15–30.

Sun, J. (2025). *Symbol and ritual: A comparative analysis of Pina Bausch's and Yang Liping's Rite of Spring*. New Legend, (4), 65–67.

Wu, Z. (2025). *Gender dynamics in Pina Bausch's Bluebeard: A multimodal discourse analysis perspective*. Mass Culture & Art, (4), 88–90. https://doi.org/10.20112/j.cnki.ISSN1007-5828.2025.04.029

Xiong, Z. (2024). *Narrative innovation through body, character, and time in Bluebeard by Pina Bausch*. Literary and Art Weekly, (11), 89–92.

Zhang, Z. (2025). *Existential therapy in Being and Time*. Zhejiang Academic Journal, (2), 155–163. https://doi.org/10.16235/j.cnki.33-1005/c.2025.02.023

Zheng, J. (2025). *Meng Nv: Female subjectivity, self-identification and existential exploration*. Yangtze River Novel Criticism, (2), 71–75.

Zheng, X. (2023). *A brief analysis of the uniqueness of Pina Bausch's movement forms and rules*. Dance Appreciation, (1), 75–77.

Zhu, M. (2021). *On the contribution and inspiration of Pina Bausch's Tanztheater to the development of modern dance*. Mass Culture & Art, (4), 110–111. https://doi.org/10.20112/j.cnki.issn1007-5828.2021.04.057