

# On high heels: A praxiography of doing Argentine tango

European Journal of Women's Studies

20(4) 455–467

© The Author(s) 2013

Reprints and permissions:

sagepub.co.uk/journalsPermissions.nav

DOI: 10.1177/1350506813496397

ejw.sagepub.com



**Beate Littig**

Institute for Advanced Studies (IHS), Austria

## Abstract

Argentine tango has been investigated by scholars of various disciplinary backgrounds. A broad range of empirical methods has been used in this research. But little attention has been paid to the artefacts which participate in the practice of Argentine tango. Following the programmatic claims of the 'practical turn' in the social sciences and in cultural studies, practices are always linked with the materiality of the practising bodies and of the artefacts participating in practices. Thus materiality is indispensable for the analysis of any practice. How materiality can be included into the generating of data and the analysis is little discussed in practice theories. High heels in Argentine tango are the example to demonstrate the necessary application of various qualitative research instruments to investigate the role of artefacts in practice. High heeled female dancing shoes as used in Argentine tango are analysed with respect to their gendered performative and symbolic impact.

## Keywords

Autoethnography, body, gender, materiality, practice theory

## Introduction

Argentine tango is clearly *en vogue*. This is evident not only in the expansion of special dance events, so-called *milongas*, around the world, but in the growing music industry, the global tango tourism trend and the increase in (internet) sales of Argentine dance shoes, tango clothing and accessories. According to *Tango Danza* (No. 1, 2009) magazine, a study by the Buenos Aires Government Observatory of Cultural Industries indicated that tango generated direct revenues of around 135,000,000 Argentine pesos in 2006, 75% of which came from foreign dance enthusiasts. If transport, accommodation and subsistence costs were added to this figure, economist Jorge Marchini maintains that

---

### Corresponding author:

Beate Littig, Department of Sociology, Institute for Advanced Studies (IHS), Stumpergasse 56, A-1060 Vienna, Austria.

Email: littig@ihs.ac.at

this amount could be tripled. Some 150,000 people attend tango classes regularly in Buenos Aires. Marchini estimates that 35,000 people participate in around 300 *milongas* at 120 different venues each week. Other economic sectors in Argentina also profit from this development, including the manufacture of dance shoes and their worldwide sale via the internet. From 2006 to 2008, 95% of dance shoe sales revenues came from foreign customers.<sup>1</sup>

But tango has also become a topic in science and research. Of late, tango has been the subject of articles in social research and cultural studies (Dreher and Figueroa-Dreher, 2009; Klein, 2009; Olszewski, 2008; Salvigliano, 1995), migration studies (Viladrich, 2005), medicine (Murcia et al., 2009) and (historical) musicology (Reichardt, 1984). While the methods used span almost the entire empirical repertoire – from quantitative experiments and surveys through qualitative enquiry, from participant observation to multi-method ethnography – existing research pays little attention to the material artefacts involved.<sup>2</sup> But tango dancing is clearly a practice; and according to the claims of the ‘practice turn’ seen in recent years in the social and cultural sciences, practices are always linked to corporeality and materiality, and therefore the artefacts used in them should also be taken into consideration in analysis. Other than in actor-network-theory, which treats materiality/objects/non-humans mainly as equal *actants* in social networks (Latour, 2005), practice theory analyses materiality/objects/things in relation to the performing body and the meaning attributed to them and the practice itself (Shove et al., 2012).

This article presents a practice theory perspective as a specific research attitude (Schmidt, 2012). This attitude emphasizes a methodology which takes a practice turn towards research objects. The fact that central relevance is attributed hereby to materiality (in the artefact and body sense) is demonstrated in this article by means of the example of high heels used in Argentine tango. As I will show, high heels are of central relevance in this dance, and their effects are wide and varied: they are symbolic, they aid performance, and they also have a global, socioeconomic impact. In short, high heels are *the* attribute, which traditionally symbolizes the popular notion of Argentine tango: sexiness, eroticism and passion. Even in less traditional contexts, like cross-over or neo-tango *milongas*, where men might wear casual dancing sneakers or classical dancing shoes, only a few women will do so. The dominant female footwear are high heels, even if they are combined with a casual outfit (like jeans and T-shirts).

I draw on the extensive data I have generated over the last five years as a participant observer in various local tango clubs and *milongas*, mainly in Vienna, Berlin and Buenos Aires. I have taken field notes from my observations, usually the day after the *milonga*. Since I did not want to interfere with the field by ‘outing’ myself as a researcher, I did not conduct formal interviews. However, I had informal talks with dancers asking them relevant questions for my research in a more casual manner. I also refer to data gained from self-observation. For the past 13 years I have been a female leader based in the Viennese tango community, who does not wear high heels but flat dancing shoes. Most of my observations stem from traditional *milongas*, where I usually lead women, rarely men. I have also participated in cross-over and queer *milongas*. When I dance as a follower, which I occasionally do, I also wear flat shoes. As an experiment, I tried dancing in high heels several times in order to observe what difference this makes with respect to my own

bodily sensations and my perception as a dancer. I did this especially in places where I was not known as a female leader in order to enhance my chances of being invited to dance, especially by men. Being at the same time an insider (as a tango dancer) and an outsider (as a female leader who does not wear heels) allows for both insight into the field as well as a critical reading of the experience of wearing high heels. In addition, I analysed emails, YouTube videos and brochures, which are distributed via internet platforms, social networks or dancing events. In technical terms I designed my empirical research as multi-sited ethnography, relying as much on participant observation as on a set of particular methods (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea, 2006).

## **A practice theoretical perspective and its study**

The ‘practice turn’, which deals with the theories and analysis of social practices, emerged in social theory from about the 1990s onwards and has been gaining increasing relevance (Reckwitz, 2002; Schatzki, 2010; Schatzki et al., 2001). From a theoretical perspective, a common thread in practice-based approaches is that the explanation of human behaviour is grounded neither primarily on the individual level nor primarily on the structural level. These approaches seek instead to analyse behaviour and chains of action from a perspective which considers both the opportunities open to individual actors and the effect of established social structures (Reckwitz, 2002). Social practices are a central concept here. According to the work of Theodore Schatzki, a social practice is a nexus of verbal and non-verbal activities (Schatzki, 1997). Practices involve very different actors or agents, who base their actions and behaviour both on tacit routines and explicit rules. Sequences of actions and their intended and unintended consequences are not based on the individual actions of a particular person with a specific purpose (motive, norm, etc.). Instead, the term practice concentrates on the repetition and repeatability of a complex of incorporated activities carried out by various agents at various points in time and in various places, depending on the situation. Practice theories are interested far less in the views, motives or intentions of actors and more in the physical execution of activities and the things used to do so. Shove et al. (2012) argue that social practices rely on three interlinked components: materiality, competences and meaning. Consequently the empirical analysis has to include: first, materiality, i.e. things, objects, infrastructure that are relevant for carrying out a practice; second, bodies which enact incorporated skills and competences referring to implicit and explicit knowledge; and third, meaning attributed to bodies, materiality and the practice itself. On the methodological level, there is disagreement in the debate about practice theories regarding the methods that are suitable for studying social practices. In particular, the issue of how to actually go about researching materiality has so far been a recent and limited development. Participant observation was long held to be the primary research method, and some experts still view it as the only admissible method, since they consider subjective constructions of meaning immaterial (e.g. Hirschauer, 1999). Participation centres quite often on those practices which can be observed or reconstructed by a researcher who remains an external observer. Such an understanding of participant observation neglects that autoethnographic self-observation – the use of the researcher’s own body as a research tool – can provide valuable insights into physical practices which draw on embodied experience (like dancing

or playing a musical instrument; Atkinson, 2006). However, other methods, such as discourse analysis, qualitative interviews (Reckwitz, 2008) and extended ethnographic research, i.e. a method mix, increasingly form part of the methodological repertoire. Law, Mol and de Laet all use the term 'praxiography' to refer to a special research approach which stresses the need to allow the actual field to define the methods used (Law, 2004). With analogies to actor-network-theory, they view practice as 'enactment' in the sense of an interaction of human and non-human participants (Jonas, 2013; Shove et al., 2012). In their empirical studies to date, they even select objects as the starting points of their research, such as the 'Zimbabwe Bush Pump' (De Laet and Mol, 2000) or the 'Cumbrian Sheep' (Law and Mol, 2008). This approach points in another direction to the one presented in artefact analyses that seek to reconstruct meaning and actions, because it centres on the contributory effect of artefacts in practices (see Hodder, 2000). Nonetheless, artefact analyses can also be beneficial to praxiological approaches as part of a multi-method research design. Summarizing the methodological implications of praxiographic studies with respect to the present enquiry I want to make the following points.

First, praxiographic research places the interwoven, supra-individual social practices linked to materiality in the centre of the empirical and theoretical analysis. First-hand reports from the actors regarding their activities (interviews, diaries, filed notes or discussions, documents) are an important methodological form of access. The associated attributions of meaning are unavoidable and must be given due consideration in the interpretation (Yanow and Schwartz-Shea, 2006). If practices are understood as 'a nexus of doings and sayings' in Schatzki's sense (1997), then the attribution of meaning is also a discursive practice and therefore a necessary part of the empirical analysis. In my research I used informal talks with participants of the *milongas* as a discursive data source and included their own meaning making in the analysis.

Second, in addition to external observation, the study of incorporated physical practices (like dancing or playing a musical instrument) ideally requires the use of the researcher's own body as a research instrument (Ellis, 2004; Van Maanen, 1988; Wacquant, 2000). With regard to studying dancing, autoethnography is one method among others, which is commonly used despite the threat that the research will become overly individualized (Davida, 2011; Harris, 2003; Olszewski, 2008). In the present enquiry, dancing with or without high heels and dancing as a leader or follower has been used with autoethnographical intention, along with my extensive participant observation.

## Argentine tango – the dance

Argentine tango is a couples' dance which – unlike standardized international style tango – does not follow fixed sequences of steps or figures and is only really choreographed for show or stage performances. Ideally, Argentine tango dancers improvise while dancing, i.e. combining steps arbitrarily that lead the dancers in different directions around the dance floor, making turns or using short sequences (*ochos*: figure eights, *crusados*: crossing of the legs, etc.) depending on the music and their ability. However, as with other improvisation forms like jazz (Becker, 2000) or theatre (Yanow, 2001), the course

of the action does not develop entirely spontaneously, since dancers draw on a series of rehearsed elements. A tango couple usually reflects traditional gender order: the man leads and the woman follows (as is also the case in other couple dances; see Haller, 2009). The lead makes sure the couple does not run into other couples on the dance floor and moves in the required direction (anti-clockwise). But his primary role is to lead the couple intentionally through the dance by subtly altering the alignment of his and his partner's bodies, the body tension between them and their direction. A lead uses his torso to communicate suggestions, which the follower must recognize, interpret and answer with appropriate movements in fractions of seconds (Olszewski, 2008). The follower, in turn, has a certain scope within which she can influence the dance, through delays, embellishments or a slight spatial reorientation of her body relative to his.

While the man leading and woman following *como dormida* (as if sleeping) might make tango appear 'macho', both dancers in fact depend on each other's cooperation to avoid stumbling and even falling (Reichardt, 1984: 67).<sup>3</sup> If their interaction is to succeed in line with prescribed norms and ideals, a couple must synchronize continuously with each other throughout the dance: 'As with social interaction in general, dancing, too, although geared to perfection, rarely achieves it. Dancers get out of breath, sweat and stumble, and in a perfect illustration of imperfect synchronization, they step on one another's toes' (Luckmann, 2008: 279). The tango researcher Paula-Irene Villa interprets a dancer's frustration with imperfect synchronization, boredom with repetitive steps and disappointment with a less than spectacular performance as a 'productive collapse of transfer between aesthetic discourse and dance practice' (Villa, 2009: 105, my translation). That tango practices do not match discursive ideals is, in Villa's view, a (desirable) opportunity for tango to develop beyond the dichotomous gender order stereotype. It is the somatic self-will that cannot be controlled and which forces the bodies of the dancers to behave and move differently than the role models would prescribe it:

The difference between man/male and woman/female is dramatized iconographically, confirmed rhetorically and enacted in material and spatial form: Tango exudes *passion*. It is still the most spirited and emotionally intense of all couple dances. And even if it is no longer touted across the board as erotic, lascivious or 'sexy', it is still promoted as 'emotionally intense'. This formulation is a rhetorical modernization in the debate that clearly reflects the *de facto* experiences of dancers. (Villa, 2009: 111, my translation)

Tango practices have repeatedly changed since the early days of the dance and continue to evolve into a variety of coexistent styles of music and dance.<sup>4</sup> For example, when tango established itself among the upper classes, it was tamed at the same time: provocative movements were banned from its repertoire – at least within this group. Head positions were changed: dancers now look in the same rather than opposite directions because (it is claimed) having their heads parallel to each other prevents the couple from sharing verbal intimacies. In addition, in the early days of tango, it was common (although not a matter of course and not without controversy) for two men to dance together when practising, because there were fewer women dancers. Many of these women came from the red light district, which meant that they had to be paid for taxi dancing (Reichardt, 1984: 66). But the ideal pairing remained a mixed gender couple.

There are, however, some signs that the traditional tango gender order is becoming more relaxed. So-called queer tango has set itself the explicit goal of removing the prevalent heterosexual and macho gender roles. The first queer tango festival was held in Hamburg in 2001 and became the forerunner of similar events in Buenos Aires and other cities, as well as the *queer milongas* in Buenos Aires (and other metropolises).<sup>5</sup> These events are attended not only by gays and lesbians, but also by those who want to break down traditional gender-specific roles in tango.<sup>6</sup>

### **No pain, no gain! High heels in Argentine tango**

Footwear plays a major role in many forms of dancing. After all, dancing is primarily about walking, even when that walking involves a music-driven rhythm, and turning. The centrality of footwear is certainly the case for Argentine tango. When you go to a tango event or *milonga*, one of the first things you might notice is the shoes, and in particular the high heeled dance shoes. Varied and eye-catching, they come in different colours and heights, with thick or thin heels, open or closed toes, straps or buckles, smooth leather, suede or occasionally fabric uppers, etc. Female tango dancers are also shown wearing high heels in early pictures and photos (for example published in Reichardt, 1984 and Savigliano, 1995). Today the heels on women's shoes range in height from 4 to 11 centimetres and their points are sharp. The soles below the ball of the foot can also be made of different materials, like suede, smooth leather, or even plastic. Small plastic plates function as sole at the tips of the heels to serve as protectors for the shoes and the floor. The different soles are not just a matter of personal preference; they are also chosen to suit the properties of the dance floor, e.g. how smooth, slippery or sticky its surface is. *Milongas* take place in very different locations – in bars, community centres, church halls, party rooms in sport clubs, adapted lofts, shopping mall foyers, or if the weather allows, outdoor in public spaces, etc. Not many of these places have a professional floating wooden dance floor, which is, from a physiological point of view, best suited for dancing. Since the sloping position of the foot in high heels already creates unsteadiness, it is important to avoid slipping as much as possible, either by choosing appropriate soles or, alternatively, by applying a special talc to the soles before dancing on a badly waxed or polished floor.

In tango, a close relationship is established between the body and the high heeled shoes. The latter are literally buckled on to the former and have a direct, physical effect on how the wearer stands and walks. The raised heel and transfer of weight between the fore and hind foot tilts the pelvis forward, making the backside stick out and accentuating it. The overall stance is more upright, the stomach appears flatter, and the bust is pushed further out. At the same time, the woman becomes less stable on her feet. She basically stands and walks the whole time on the tips of her toes, albeit supported by the heel. Tango heels lower than 6 cm are a rare sight on the dance floor. The majority of women wear shoes with heels between 8 and 10 cm. The smaller the foot and the higher the heel, the steeper is the angle of the foot. Even a dancer who has perfected the technique of walking alone or standing on one foot in high heels will still need to lean on her partner during a tango – not least because the follower role requires a lot of walking

backwards. Women usually have to learn and practise the art of standing and walking in high heels – both in everyday life and on the dance floor. Well-made shoes with cushioned soles and special inserts may allow dancers to dance longer without pain or bring them some relief, but feet tire more quickly in high heels, they need breaks from the dance to recover, and they hurt when heels are worn for longer periods of time.<sup>7</sup> If a woman's posture is also wrong, the pain will be worse, and she will convey anything but the desired sex appeal.

A vigilant observer will also notice that women usually arrive at a *milonga* wearing flatter shoes. They keep their high heels in special shoe bags to be unpacked and put on at the venue. Men also swap their street shoes for dancing shoes, and while these can be flamboyant in their design, they are generally either flat or have low heels (max. 3 cm). Some men, particularly of the younger generation, now wear special dance-sneakers. So while men do change their shoes when they begin to tango, this change requires far less adjustment on their part than climbing into high heels demands of women. When asked if they also wear high heels at home or at work, many women answered 'no – just to tango'. Some even reported that they were first confronted with high heels through tango. They have no doubt also been confronted with their sexualized image: according to Tace Hedrick (2001), spike heels have become synonymous with 'brownness', i.e. with the gender-related and ethnically loaded requisites of exotic, Latin American beauty.

High heels are often the topic of conversation at a *milonga*. Particularly nice, ugly, high or otherwise eye-catching shoes are sure to attract a comment or two. Shoes are often the cause of complaints about pains in the ball of the foot or even blisters. I have been involved in talks in which women share details of good shoemakers or special shops where shoes can be cushioned or altered to make them more comfortable. Such conversations are more common at the end of an event, when the offending articles have been removed, and the dancers can once again relax with their feet flat on the floor.

Tango lessons can be organized as single or as group classes. Quite common are classes before the *milonga*, which prolong the dance evening for the participants by about one and a half hours. Women often wear flat shoes in tango classes so that they can rest their feet for the evening's dancing. A tango can be danced in flat shoes, but as any woman will tell you, it's not the same as doing it in heels. 'You feel and move differently when you're wearing heels' is a frequently heard remark. High heels have a direct physical effect on the body, for example, because they force the wearer to walk upright. But they are not an absolute necessity for dancing a tango. Even if turns in tango are always executed on the ball of the foot, the dancer doesn't need to be wearing high heels to do so. A turn can also be made in flat shoes if the heel is raised properly. However, some specific *adornos* (embellishments), like drawing small circles on the floor with the heel or lifting the foot quickly on to the heel, cannot be performed in flat shoes in the same way. You can execute some *adornos* in flat shoes, but these are by necessity different to those done in heels (e.g. drawing circles on the floor with the forefoot). Even if they hurt, high heels are still part of the outfit. Or as the saying goes: 'no pain, no gain'. As we will see in the next section, the gain from high heels in Argentine tango is strongly linked with their symbolic meaning.

## The symbolic character of high heels

Wearing high heels is like a ritual used to 'escape from everyday life' (Villa, 2000). A *milonga* is the perfect opportunity to dress up in beautiful, sensual clothes (perhaps after a long soak in a bath or refreshing shower), put on your make-up, spray yourself liberally with scent and carefully adorn yourself with your chosen outfit. In this regard, high heels have a primarily performative effect. They are a female adornment, to which are attributed seductive powers, and they contribute considerably to gender portrayal (Benstock and Ferriss, 2001: 10ff.): the accentuation and visible raising of the buttocks that is associated with being sexy and the unsteadiness in the walk that suggests the need for a strong, unwavering, usually male partner who will also lead on the dance floor, both reproduce gender stereotypes. But the physical effects of high heels are closely linked to symbolic meanings: sexiness and female weakness, which needs male strength to get along (in life). A symbol represents something else than the object used as such. Symbols are meaningful and interpretable. The meaning is socially constructed and can be understood on the basis of shared knowledge of specific social entities. Praxiologically spoken meanings are central within communities of practice. According to Etienne Wenger communities of practice are groups of people who share something that matters to them (Wenger, 1998). They are bound together through what they do together and by the capabilities (routines, styles, talks, etc.) they have produced and improved over time. The practices of the community members reflect their own understanding of what is meaningful to them. This can also mean that there are disputes about meaning, which holds true for the tango community. As Villa states, the struggles about the essence of tango, leading/following and male and female, authenticity, etc. are a constitutive part of the tango practice (Villa, 2003).<sup>8</sup>

High heels have various symbolic effects, which are meaningful to the practice community of Argentine tango. They signal a readiness to dance and thus serve to distinguish the dancers from other people at a dance (who are wearing regular shoes). High heels also signal that their wearer will dance the female role and (most likely) not lead. But heels also symbolize a dancer's status and proficiency in dancing: the higher the proficiency, the higher the heels, and the greater the dancer's ability to use them. For many women, this means starting off in lower heels (4 cm) and gradually progressing to higher heels. Take, for example, the reaction of an advanced tango dancer, for whom I bought 5 cm heeled shoes in Buenos Aires. She just eyed them sceptically and then said: 'But they are for beginners!'

The change to higher heels is like an initiation rite: the investment in high heeled dance shoes means the dancer takes dancing seriously – and is also taken seriously as a dancer (Villa, 2000). Along with a seductive outfit (individual tastes differ as to what makes it seductive), high heels are a key contributor to a woman's attractiveness and the likelihood of a man asking her to dance. In tango, prowess on the dance floor, sexualized styling and ultimately also age (the younger the better) are a woman's currency. In tango, it is quite often the man who asks a woman to dance. As I experienced and as my informants told me, a woman who ignores this convention and seeks to invite a man to be her partner may well suffer arrogant or disdainful, but at any rate unpleasant, rebuffs. Many Argentine tango instructors use flowery metaphors to teach not only the dance, the steps

and the correct posture (a bit like a pride and majestic lion and lioness), but also the traditional etiquette, including the so-called *cabeceo* (literally ‘nod of the head’). This is a special Argentine form of asking a person to dance using eye contact alone, which is particularly common in traditional *milongas* especially in Buenos Aires.

The geographic origin of a pair of high heeled tango shoes is another symbolic element. Nowadays, high heels, like men’s tango shoes, usually come from Argentina and will have been acquired through one of a number of channels. They might have been bought on a visit to Buenos Aires in one of the city’s many dance shoe shops, where a pair of high heels will currently set you back between €70 and €150. Foreign *tangueros/as* (tango aficionados) usually return home from a trip to Buenos Aires with several pairs of dance shoes in their luggage. The shoes can also be ordered on the internet. And they can be purchased at a *milonga* or tango festival, where there will usually be some stalls selling dance shoes and clothing to provide the organizers with a little extra income on top of admissions. Historical trends confirm that shoes have long served as a mark of distinction: ‘Shoes serve as markers of gender, class, race, ethnicity, and even sexuality. Shoes have, historically, delineated clear class distinctions, for instance. Heels have from the time they first appeared in Italy, signaled that the wearer – male of female – belongs to the leisure class’ (Benstock and Ferriss, 2001: 5). As with other products, there are also different brands of tango shoes, some of which enjoy a particularly high profile and desirable image. Brands are also a means of distinction in the tango scene, with design, quality of material and craftsmanship viewed as the most important distinguishing elements. You need specific knowledge to recognize the different brands of shoes. One accumulates this knowledge by studying advertising blurbs or product descriptions and by talking to others. The shoe bags used to transport shoes to a *milonga* are another good source of information about the shoes they contain. The bags usually display the name of the manufacturer or the shop in which the shoes were purchased. If you know your shoes, you can decode this information in terms of the manufacturer’s reputation. Having this kind of information is what makes you an insider. Owning and wearing shoes from Argentina also signify that you belong.

The globalization of Argentine tango has turned tango shoes into a global product, and the socioeconomic effects of this commercialization on the Argentine shoe industry cannot be ignored. The high demand for Argentine dance shoes comes primarily (at around 95%) from abroad. Orders placed over the internet are on the rise. Virtually every tango shoe website has instructions on the correct way to measure the feet. This demand will probably increase further, not just because shoes wear out, but because the global tango community is growing and dancers usually own several pairs of shoes to match their different outfits.<sup>9</sup>

It is not just the strong demand for shoes and clothing that attests to the increasing commercialization of Argentine tango. In places where tango has established itself, the improvised dance events of an earlier time are increasingly giving way to professionally managed events organized for (more or less) profit. *Milongas* and dance classes are no longer purely the domain of Argentine migrants or touring dancers, they are now also offered by a growing number of dance enthusiasts who pronounce themselves tango instructors or use their professional training in other fields (e.g. marketing or tourism) to promote and market tango. The internet and cheap airfares have also contributed strongly

to the proliferation of a global tango economy and cultural globalization of the dance. Argentina has clearly now also recognized the trend. After a chequered 130-year history in which tango has been alternately scorned, ignored, celebrated, encouraged, banned and then rediscovered by the Argentine elite, it is once again a permanent fixture in official Argentine cultural policy and a substantial factor in the country's economy. In September 2009, it was inscribed on the UNESCO Representative List of Intangible Cultural Heritage. The nominators, Argentina and Uruguay, have been declared responsible to take safeguarding measures to preserve their tango tradition.<sup>10</sup> In times of neoliberalism and economic crisis, this could have far more than mere symbolic relevance in the future. Argentina could claim authenticity for Argentine tango and try to monopolize and merchandize it.

### Leading women and men wearing high heels

My aim in this article was to examine the (contributory) performative, symbolic and bodily effects of one specific artefact – high heeled dance shoes – in Argentine tango. I took a praxiological approach to this particular subject to exemplify that and how materiality is constituent for a social practice. In this final section I will link the practice of dancing Argentine tango with high heels to gender issues.

Doing Argentine tango clearly is a gendered practice, and high heels are an important means for doing gender. In tango, wearing high heels is reserved for female dancers. Interestingly, however, heels were originally worn by men. Male Persian horse riders, for example, wore heeled boots because they were good for keeping the foot in the stirrup (Semmelhack, 2008). European upper-class men fascinated by the strong Persian military tradition introduced the Persian heeled shoe fashion at the end of the 16th century to Europe. This trend was soon taken up by women. According to Semmelhack (2008), in the 18th century rationality was ascribed to men and irrationality to women – a gendered divide which was reflected in fashion, too. Men began to wear more functional, less ornamented clothes and shoes and stopped using make-up. High heels which are irrational and non-functional for walking – except if you are a horse rider – became associated with femininity and, through pornographic photography, linked to female desirability.

While the vast majority of female tango dancers wear high heels, men never do – not even those (few) who 'let themselves be led'. Even in queer tango, where same-sex couples dance together and the roles of leader and follower are danced by members of either sex, men do not wear high heels. One possible reason for this could be that men wearing high heels are usually associated with drag (Bridges, 2010). In the traditional gender order in Argentine tango, drag is probably only acceptable during Mardi Gras. On the rare occasions that women lead in traditional *milongas*, they often do so in flat shoes, frequently even switching deliberately from high heels to flats. The reason for that is the greater stability in posture. Moreover, in Argentine tango, a woman wearing flat shoes and dancing the lead attracts attention. In my experience, such behaviour is usually (but not always) tolerated in traditional *milongas*, although accompanied perhaps by a pitying smile with the insinuation that these women are only dancing together because they would otherwise have no other opportunities to dance.<sup>11</sup> A female leader is still seen – in Judith Butler's terms – as a subversion of the prevailing heterosexual gender code in Argentine tango (see Villa, 2000).

However, the number of leading women, often practising both roles, is (slowly) growing. In Europe there are courses especially for women who want to learn how to lead. As an effect of the international tango tourism this phenomenon – the female leader (with or without high heels) – is not limited to Europe, but has passed to some of the more liberal *milongas* in Buenos Aires, along with the small number of queer *milongas*. Leading women have had a subversive effect on the traditional gender regime of the tango salon. Sometimes women not only lead other women but also men, which implies an additional challenge to the traditional gender order. In my view, the subversion of gender stereotypes would be even more pronounced if men started to follow female leaders and wear high heels themselves. This would in one fell swoop disassociate traditional gender roles and their usual accessories from the gendered dance roles in Argentine tango. Moreover, if both partners exchanged roles of leading and following within one and the same dance the very notion of leader and follower as gendered positions would become unsettled as well. Then – and only then – would we find ourselves with some real ‘gender trouble’ in Argentine tango.

### Funding

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

### Notes

1. See [http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tango\\_Argentino](http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tango_Argentino) (accessed 3 June 2013; translation by the author). Wikipedia is generally not considered a reliable academic source but certainly might be used to indicate popular understandings. Regarding figures on the economic impact of the global tango fever, there are few sources available so far.
2. One exception is the work carried out by Paula-Irene Villa (2000, 2003, 2009), whose analyses of the tango deal at length with the body and to some extent also with artefacts, albeit not from a methodological perspective.
3. Ultimately, Villa’s assessment that the relationship between the lead and the follower is hierarchical, i.e. that the woman traditionally follows the man, would seem to ring true (Villa, 2000: 247–254).
4. For an overview see [http://tejastango.com/tango\\_styles.html](http://tejastango.com/tango_styles.html) (accessed 3 June 2013). The changes in the styles of dance also correspond(ed) with the (ongoing) development of the music. From the 1990s tango was mixed with other genres of music. New ensembles, composers and singers came on the scene which merged the music of the Rio de la Plata with pop, rock, jazz, Latin and electronic music. See [http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tango\\_Argentino](http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tango_Argentino) (accessed 3 June 2013).
5. See [http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Queer\\_Tango](http://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Queer_Tango) (accessed 3 June 2013); see also Hartmann (2002) and Villa (2000).
6. See also the explanation of ‘tango queer’ provided by the Argentine activist Mariana Docampo: <http://buenosairestangoqueer.blogspot.com/2009/04/what-is-queer-tango.html> (accessed 3 June 2013).
7. One of the reviewers pointed to the availability of footbaths in El Corte in Holland and to foot-massages often offered in big tango festivals.
8. I owe this observation to one of the reviewers.
9. The social and ecological conditions under which dance shoes are manufactured merit study in their own right. For more on unfair working conditions in the global shoe industry, see for example Benstock and Ferriss (2001).

10. Quote from the UNESCO Decision; available at: [www.unesco.org/culture/ich/RL/00258](http://www.unesco.org/culture/ich/RL/00258) (accessed 3 June 2013).
11. About four years ago I was expelled from the dance floor by the attendant at *Cachirulo*, a very traditional *milonga* in Buenos Aires, where I danced with a woman as a female leader.

## References

- Atkinson P (2006) Rescuing autoethnography. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 35(4): 400–404.
- Becker H (2000) The etiquette of improvisation. *Mind, Culture, and Activity* 7(3): 171–176.
- Benstock S and Ferriss S (2001). Introduction. In: Benstock S and Ferriss S (eds) *Footnotes: On Shoes*. New Brunswick, NJ and London: Rutgers University Press, pp. 1–16.
- Bridges TS (2010) Men just weren't made to do this. Performances of drag at 'Walk a Mile in Her Shoes' marches. *Gender and Society* 24(1): 5–30.
- Davida D (ed.) (2011) *Fields in Motion: Ethnography in the Worlds of Dance*. Waterloo, Ontario: Wilfrid Laurier University Press.
- De Laet M and Mol A (2000) The Zimbabwe Bush Pump: Mechanics of a fluid technology. *Social Studies of Science* 20(2): 225–263.
- Dreher J and Figueroa-Dreher SK (2009) Soñando todos el mismo sueño. *Zur rituellen Überschreitung kultureller Grenzen im Tango*. In: Klein G (ed.) *Tango in Translation. Tanz zwischen Medien, Kulturen, Kunst und Politik*. Bielefeld: Transcript, pp. 39–56.
- Ellis C (2004) *The Ethnographic I: A Methodological Novel about Autoethnography*. Walnut Creek, CA: Alta Mira Press.
- Haller M (2009) 'Verschmelzung': Bürgerliches Paarideal im Tango Argentino. In: Klein G (ed.) *Tango in Translation. Tanz zwischen Medien, Kulturen, Kunst und Politik*. Bielefeld: Transcript, pp. 89–104.
- Harris KM (2003) An examination of the pointe shoe as artifact through ethnographic and gender analysis. *Material History Review* 58 (Fall): 4–12.
- Hartmann A (2002) Doing tango – performing gender. Zur (De-)Konstruktion von Geschlechtsidentitäten in Literatur und Tanz. In: Klein G and Zipprich C (eds) *Tanz Theorie Text*. Münster: LIT, pp. 367–381.
- Hedrick T (2001) Are you a pura Latina? or menudo every day. Tacones and symbolic ethnicity. In: Benstock S and Ferriss S (eds) *Footnotes: On Shoes*. New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, pp. 135–155.
- Hirschauer S (1999) Die Praxis der Fremdheit und die Minimierung von Anwesenheit. Eine Fahrstuhlfahrt. *Soziale Welt* 50: 221–246. (English: On doing being a stranger: The practical constitution of civil inattention. *Journal for the Theory of Social Behaviour* (2005) 35(1): 41–67.)
- Hodder I (2000) The interpretation of documents and material culture. In: Denzin NK and Lincoln YS (eds) *Handbook of Qualitative Research*, 2nd edn. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage, pp. 703–771.
- Jonas M (2013) The Dortmund case: On the enactment of an urban economic imaginary. *International Journal of Urban and Regional Research* 37 (forthcoming)
- Klein G (ed.) (2009) *Tango in Translation. Tanzen zwischen Medien, Kulturen, Kunst und Politik*. Bielefeld: Transcript.
- Latour B (2005) *Reassembling the Social: An Introduction to Actor-Network-Theory*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Law J (2004) *After Method: Mess in Social Science Research*. London: Routledge.
- Law J and Mol A (2008) The actor enacted: Cumbrian Sheep in 2001. In: Malafouris L and Knappett C (eds) *Material Agency: Towards a Non-Anthropocentric Approach*. Wiesbaden: Springer, pp. 55–77.

- Luckmann T (2008) On social interaction and the communicative construction of personal identity, knowledge and reality. *Organization Studies* 29(2): 277–290.
- Murcia Quiroga C, Bongard S and Kreutz G (2009) Emotional and neurohumoral responses to dancing tango Argentino: The effects of music and partner. *Music and Medicine* 1(1): 14–21.
- Olszewski B (2008) El cuerpo del baile: The kinetic and social fundaments of tango. *Body and Society* 14(2): 63–81.
- Reckwitz A (2002) Toward a theory of social practices: A development in culturalist theorizing. *European Journal of Social Theory* 5(2): 243–263.
- Reckwitz A (2008) Praktiken und Diskurse – Eine sozialtheoretische und methodologische Reflexion. In: Kalthoff H, Hirschauer S and Lindemann G (eds) *Theoretische Empirie – Zur Relevanz qualitativer Forschung*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp, pp. 188–209.
- Reichardt D (ed.) (1984) *Tango*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- Savigliano ME (1995) *Tango and the Political Economy of Passion*. Boulder, CO: Westview Press.
- Schatzki TR (1997) Practices and actions: A Wittgensteinian critique of Bourdieu and Giddens. *Philosophy of the Social Sciences* 27(3): 283–308.
- Schatzki TR (2010) Materiality and social life. *Nature and Culture* 5(2): 123–149.
- Schatzki TR, Knorr-Cetina K and Von Savigny E (eds) (2001) *The Practice Turn: Contemporary Theory*. London: Routledge.
- Schmidt R (2012) *Soziologie der Praktiken. Empirische Analysen und empirische Analysen*. Frankfurt am Main: Suhrkamp.
- Semmelhack E (2008) *The Heights of Fashion: A History of the Elevated Shoe*. Pittsburg, PA: Periscope/Bata Shoe Museum Foundation.
- Shove E, Pantzar M and Watson M (2012) *The Dynamics of Social Practice: Everyday Life and How it Changes*. Los Angeles: Sage.
- Van Maanen J (1988) *Tales of the Field: On Writing Ethnography*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Viladrich A (2005) Tango immigrants in New York City: The value of social reciprocities. *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography* 34(5): 533–559.
- Villa P-I (2000) *Sexy Bodies. Eine soziologische Reise durch den Geschlechtskörper*. Opladen: VS.
- Villa P-I (2003) Mit dem Ernst des Körpers spielen: Körper, Diskurse und Emotionen im Argentinischen Tango. In: Alkemeyer T, Boschert B, Schmidt R and Gebauer G (eds) *Aus Spiel gesetzte Körper. Aufführungen des Sozialen in Sport und populärer Kultur*. Konstanz: UVK, pp. 131–154.
- Villa P-I (2009) ‘Das fühlt sich so anders an ...’. Zum produktiven ‘Scheitern’ des Transfers zwischen ästhetischen Diskursen und tänzerischen Praxen im Tango. In: Klein G (ed.) *Tango in Translation. Tanz zwischen Medien, Kulturen, Kunst und Politik*. Bielefeld: Transcript, pp. 105–122.
- Wacquant L (2000) *Body and Soul: Notebooks of an Apprentice Boxer*. New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Wenger E (1998) *Communities of Practice: Learning, Meaning, and Identity*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Yanow D (2001) Learning in and from improvising: Lessons from theater for organizational learning. *Reflections* 2(4): 58–62.
- Yanow D and Schwartz-Shea P (eds) (2006) *Interpretation and Method: Empirical Research Methods and the Interpretive Turn*. New York: ME Sharpe