In 2013, the German Federal Cultural Foundation hosted the Dance Congress in Düsseldorf, a triennial international event established in 2005. Its thematic title was ‘Translating Movements – Performing Translation’, addressing ‘questions concerning “limits” and “translations”’ (p. 227). The volume in review, clearly borrowing from the Congress title, could best be described as a multifaceted account of the event’s proceedings. Documented with colour photographs, the chapters cohere with the event rather than with one another. Recognizing the volume’s nature may prevent frustrated expectations, aroused by the title, especially if read without the name of the series it is published in (Critical Dance Studies). The title words are common currency now; the content reflects them only metaphorically and tangentially: a movement of borders or across borders is not a true theme of any of the texts, but ‘where there’s a will’, a sympathetic reader will find them in one shape or another. As for translation (is performing meant as a gerund adjective or as a participle?), it is only Kaite O’Reilly fascinating essay on ‘Bilingualism and Issues of Translation between Signed and Spoken Languages’ that meets the brief (though it has little to do with dance or choreography). Another catchword, participation, registers only marginally in the transcribed interview with the congress directors Sabine Gehm and Katharina von Wilcke (pp. 219–29).

Gabriele Brandstetter, an apparent driving force behind the volume, is a renowned dance theory scholar, prolific author and series editor, and co-director of the International Research Centre ‘Interweaving Performance Cultures’. Her opening essay ‘Human, Animal, Thing: Shifting Boundaries in Modern and Contemporary Dance’ (pp. 23–42) is the most
a theoretically ambitious essay of the collection, establishing a conceptual framework of approaching a particular type of dance/movement performance, inspired by animal moves and behaviour. While the theoretical reflections (based on Giorgio Agamben, Donna Haraway or Derrida) are convincing in themselves, the application to dance performance is contrived and circumstantial rather than profoundly illuminating. A concluding example in her essay brings an ironic paradox. A practitioner experimentally invited her artist friends to: ‘Find the affinity between yourself and an extinct animal. Create a score for a short and personal piece for me, about your affinity to this animal, keeping our friendship in mind’ (p. 35). The experiment is uncannily similar to an elementary drama etude (e.g. deliver Hamlet’s monologue as if you were a tiger). The link between dance and animal movement may be creatively inspiring but has theoretical limitations: dance and animal behaviour operate outside the intellectual realm (of concepts, theories and interpretations), which does not automatically infer affinity or depth. They may well be specific modes.

A similarly troubled borderline between dance and its theorization transpires in Jean-Luc Nancy’s essay ‘Dance as Image – Image as Dance’ (pp. 43–54). While it betrays a universalistic ambition, it verges on rhetorical platitudes: ‘The body is the lieu and the milieu or the mid-lieu, between “place” and “passage,” of the relation to oneself: this is why it is “out of itself” and does not satisfy the phantasmatic condition of a pure “being-in-itself”’ (p. 46). I understand (I hope) the logos-based episteme Nancy is practising; however, it is so closely connected with French as a language and its epistemological tradition that it fails to translate into English – despite the many French concepts retained in brackets.

Several texts relate to the work of choreographer Faustin Linyekula: Klaus-Peter Köpping’s informative account of the 1923 choreography La création du monde and of Linyekula’s critical ‘re-vision’/’restaging’ of it in Düsseldorf; Sabine Sörgel’s essay handles ‘The Global Politics of Faustin Linyekula’s Dance Theatre’; a version of Linyekula’s own
(somewhat discursive) talk from Düsseldorf is included; even Nancy’s essay indirectly tries to relate to it. Four further essays document and/or theorize performances and dance-related initiatives presented at the 2013 congress: some do ‘move across borders’ – doing justice to the title – though rooted mostly in the intercultural encounter in Düsseldorf (the Dance Archive Box Project, discussed by Nanako Nakajima). The concluding essay, Christel Weiler’s “‘Tea Times”: Creating Formats of Informal Exchange and Knowledge Transfer’ (pp. 231–8), is unrelated to the Dance Congress and figures perhaps as an action report of the activities of the ‘Interweaving Performance Cultures’ research centre. Some contributions are of great interest; however, the sum reads as textual miscellanea of the academic/artistic community around the two editors.