

Teacher as Student: Sophie Taeuber in Zurich, 1915–1920

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In order to better understand women artists of the twentieth-century avant-garde, we must look at them not merely in the context of standard narratives of art history but also in relationship to the different cultures within which they were living, collaborating, and making art. As an artist based in Zurich working as an art teacher, a dancer, and a Dadaist, Sophie Taeuber is a prime individual to study through this approach.¹ In this essay, I explore the relationship between Taeuber's pedagogical work in the Applied Arts Department of Zurich's Trade School, Rudolf von Laban's dance pedagogy at his School of the Art of Movement, and the evolving Dada circle in Zurich. Taeuber was one of a number of women artists active in the twentieth century who worked concurrently as teachers, from Anni Albers to Faith Ringgold to Amy Sillman. With the substantive body of research presented in the major retrospective *Sophie Taeuber-Arp: Living Abstraction* (2021–2022), now is a particularly rich moment to reconsider these interwoven aspects of Taeuber's art.² Vividly tracing Taeuber's abstraction across media, the exhibition made clear that both her production and her teaching in the applied arts were central to her artistic practice.

I expand on this connection by focusing attention on how Taeuber's work as a teacher of the applied arts, as a student of dance, and as a practicing visual artist speaks to the multiple circles in Zurich within which she operated between 1915 and 1920. While engaged with the Laban School simultaneously as a student and a performer, Taeuber was also active as a teacher at another institution. In recent scholarship, studies have more often examined Taeuber's engagement with dance than her pedagogical work. This includes Nell Andrew's chapter on Taeuber's dance practice in her *Moving Modernism: The Urge to Abstraction in Painting, Dance, Cinema* (2020). Andrew expanded on how Christine Macel and

1 I refer to Sophie Taeuber deliberately by her family name, rather than as Sophie Taeuber-Arp. As she did not marry her husband Jean Arp until October 1922, this is how she would have been known during the period in question.

2 The exhibition was shown at the Kunstmuseum Basel (20 March–20 June 2021), Tate Modern (15 July–17 October 2021), and the Museum of Modern Art (21 November–12 March 2022). The accompanying publications include *Sophie Taeuber-Arp: Living Abstraction*, Anne Umland and Walburga Krupp with Charlotte Healy (eds.), exh. cat., New York, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2021; a German-language edition of that catalogue, *Sophie Taeuber-Arp: Gelebte Abstraktion*, Anne Umland and Eva Reifert (eds.), exh. cat., Basel, Kunstmuseum Basel, Munich, 2021; and *Sophie Taeuber-Arp*, Medea Hoch, Bettina Kaufmann, and Natalia Sidlina (eds.), London, 2021.

Emma Lavigne contextualized Taeuber in the exhibition *Danser sa vie* (Dance Your Life; 2011), which shone a spotlight on dance as a medium for the avant-garde.³ There still remains much to be addressed regarding the interrelationship between Taeuber's dance and pedagogical practice, and this has been made easier by new materials presented in *Sophie Taeuber-Arp: Living Abstraction*.⁴

While involved with the Laban School, Taeuber was both a practitioner of the applied arts and a member of the burgeoning avant-garde. However, her colleagues at Zurich's Trade School so disapproved of her collaborations with the Dadaists that she opted to use a pseudonym when she danced.⁵ The Dada circle in Zurich centred around the Cabaret Voltaire, a performance venue founded in February 1916 by Hugo Ball and Emmy Hennings, and later around the Galerie Dada, which opened in 1917. It was at the Cabaret Voltaire that Taeuber first performed with the Dadaists, including Jean Arp, whom she would marry in 1922, Tristan Tzara, and Marcel Janco. Between 1918 and 1919, Francis Picabia and Gabrielle Buffet, his wife, were also based in Switzerland, and they travelled to Zurich in early 1919.⁶ Buffet would later write an important essay on Taeuber's work.⁷ Although the anarchic and irreverent activities of Dada in Zurich would seem at odds with a pedagogical practice, Taeuber found a distinct way to merge them through her art.

Sophie Taeuber as Student

Sophie Taeuber first attended Rudolf von Laban's School of the Art of Movement in Zurich in the summer of 1915. There, she would meet the dancers Mary Wigman, Katja Wulff, Suzanne Perrottet, and Maja Chruszcz.⁸ All of them later performed together at either the Cabaret Voltaire or the Galerie Dada.

3 See Nell Andrew, *Moving Modernism: The Urge to Abstraction in Painting, Dance, Cinema*, Oxford, 2020; this chapter was published earlier as Nell Andrew, "Dada Dance: Sophie Taeuber's Visceral Abstraction," *Art Journal* 73/1, 2014, pp. 12–29. Also see Christine Macel and Emma Lavigne, *Danser sa vie: Art et danse de 1900 à nos jours*, Paris, 2011; Mark Franko, "The Choreographic Imaginary: Between Expressionist Dance and Visual Abstraction," in *Sophie Taeuber-Arp*, New York, 2021 (note 2), pp. 92–94; Flora L. Brandl, "On a Curious Chance Resemblance: Rudolf von Laban's Kinetography and the Geometric Abstractions of Sophie Taeuber-Arp," *Arts* 9/1, 2020, p. 15; and Jill Fell, "Zurich Dada Dance Performance and the Role of Sophie Taeuber," in Elza Adamowicz and Eric Robertson (eds.), *Dada and Beyond*, vol. 2: Dada and Its Legacies, Amsterdam and New York, 2012, pp. 17–32.

4 See Walburga Krupp, "Beautiful, Perfect Things: Sophie Taeuber-Arp's Early Applied-Arts Career," in *Sophie Taeuber-Arp*, New York, 2021 (note 2), pp. 30–33.

5 Naima Prevots, "Zurich Dada and Dance: Formative Ferment," *Dance Research Journal* 17/1, 1985, p. 4.

6 Rachel Silveri, "Pharamousse, Funny Guy, Picabia the Loser: The Life of Francis Picabia," in *Francis Picabia: Our Heads Are Round so Our Thoughts Can Change Direction*, Anne Umland and Cathérine Hug (eds.), exh. cat., New York, Museum of Modern Art, New York, 2021, p. 318.

7 See Gabrielle Buffet-Picabia, "Sophie Taeuber-Arp" (1948), in *Rencontres avec Picabia, Apollinaire, Cravan, Duchamp, Arp, Calder*, Paris, 1977, pp. 123–128,

8 Laura Braverman and Walburga Krupp, "Chronology," in *Sophie Taeuber-Arp*, New York, 2021 (note 2), p. 305.

Taeuber explored Laban's technique in greater depth in 1917 at the artist commune Monte Verità in Ascona with a group of dancers that included Wigman and Perrottet. Earlier that year, Taeuber had led an evening programme organized by the Laban School at Zurich's Kaufleuten Hall.⁹ Buffet would later describe how Taeuber "attended Laban's expressionist dance school, of which she was one of the best students, and discovered a sense of rhythm as real in time as in space."¹⁰ Laban's methodology focused on the idea that dancers could heighten their physical sensitivity through movement, emphasizing the power of the body within choreographed forms. Through bodily sensation and improvisation, Laban encouraged dancers to reconfigure movements and dance patterns to achieve their own "dance sense."¹¹

A photograph of a masked dancer (fig. 1) performing in an elaborate costume has come to occupy a central place within the Dadaist origin myth. Many scholars have characterized this snapshot by an unknown photographer as one that captures Taeuber dancing. The date (whether 1916 or 1917), location (whether the Cabaret Voltaire or the Galerie Dada), and even the designer of the costume (whether Jean (Hans) Arp or Marcel Janco) are all contested.¹² What is relevant here regarding these uncertain circumstances is that they are a reminder of the lack of clarity that the historical record offers about Taeuber's work as a dancer. As Mark Franko has written: "Historians of dance face an impossible task in assessing Sophie Taeuber-Arp's activities as a dancer and choreographer in the 1910s on the basis of visual documentation alone."¹³ The archival record offers this one unidentified photograph, likely from the Galerie Dada in 1917, along with an evocative anecdote from Hugo Ball. Writing of Taeuber's dance titled the "Song of Flying Fish and Seahorses," which she

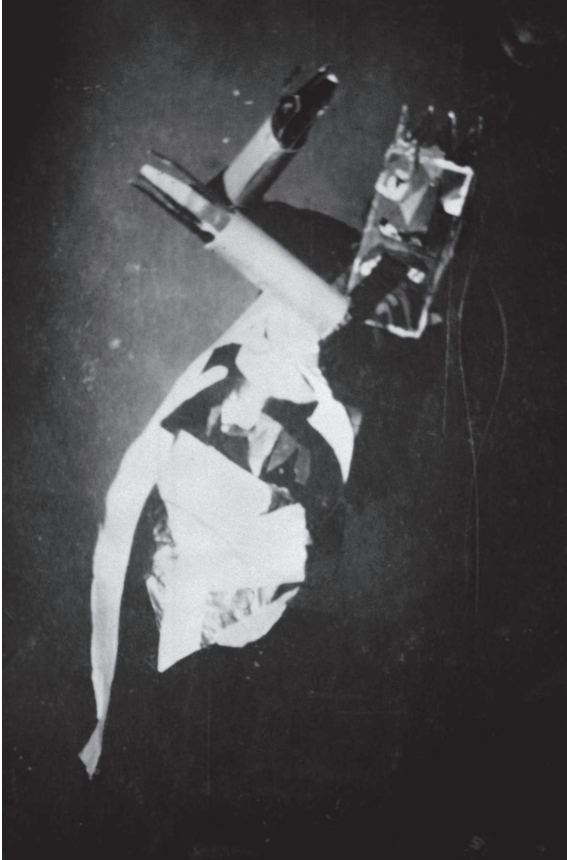
9 Ibid., p. 306.

10 Buffet-Picabia, 1977 (note 7), p. 125. Original French: "Elle suit l'école de danse expressionniste de Laban, dont elle est l'une des meilleures élèves, et se découvre un sens du rythme aussi réel dans le temps que dans l'espace" [author's trans.].

11 Rudolf Laban [1920], quoted in Sarah Burkhalter, "Kachinas and Kinesthesia: Dance in the art of Sophie Taeuber-Arp," in *Sophie Taeuber-Arp: Today Is Tomorrow*, Thomas Schmutz and Friedrich Meschede (eds.), exh. cat., Aarau, Aargauer Kunsthaus, Zurich, 2014, p. 227.

12 There are multiple viewpoints to this history. Naima Prevots described the photograph as Sophie Taeuber dancing in a costume by Jean Arp in Zurich, 29 March 1917, Prevots, 1985 (note 5), p. 4. In contrast, Hal Foster proposed that the image captures Sophie Taeuber performing in a mask by Marcel Janco at the Cabaret Voltaire in 1916; see "Dada Mime," *October* 105, 2003, p. 170. Macel and Lavigne publish the same details in Macel and Lavigne, 2011 (note 3), p. 308. Fell also characterizes the photograph as documenting Sophie Taeuber at the Cabaret Voltaire in 1916, Fell, 2012 (note 3), p. 21. Returning to Prevots's identification, Walburga Krupp discusses the photograph as a performance at the Galerie Dada on 29 March 1917, in a costume and mask by Jean Arp; see "'Real Indians': Sophie Taeuber-Arp's early work with regard to foreign cultures. Following the trail," in *Dada Africa: Dialogue with the Other*, Ralf Burmeister, Michael Oberhofer, and Esther Tisa Francini (eds.), exh. cat., Zurich, 2016, p. 52. Andrew affirmed Prevots's and Krupp's readings and explores the complexity of the photograph in Andrew, 2020 (note 3), pp. 81–82. Mark Franko most recently wrote of the photograph as pertaining to a performance at the Galerie Dada, reproduced with an image caption that is appropriately circumspect: "Figure thought to be Sophie Taeuber dancing at the opening of the Galerie Dada, Zurich, 1917," Franko, 2021 (note 3), p. 92.

13 Franko, 2021 (note 3), p. 92.

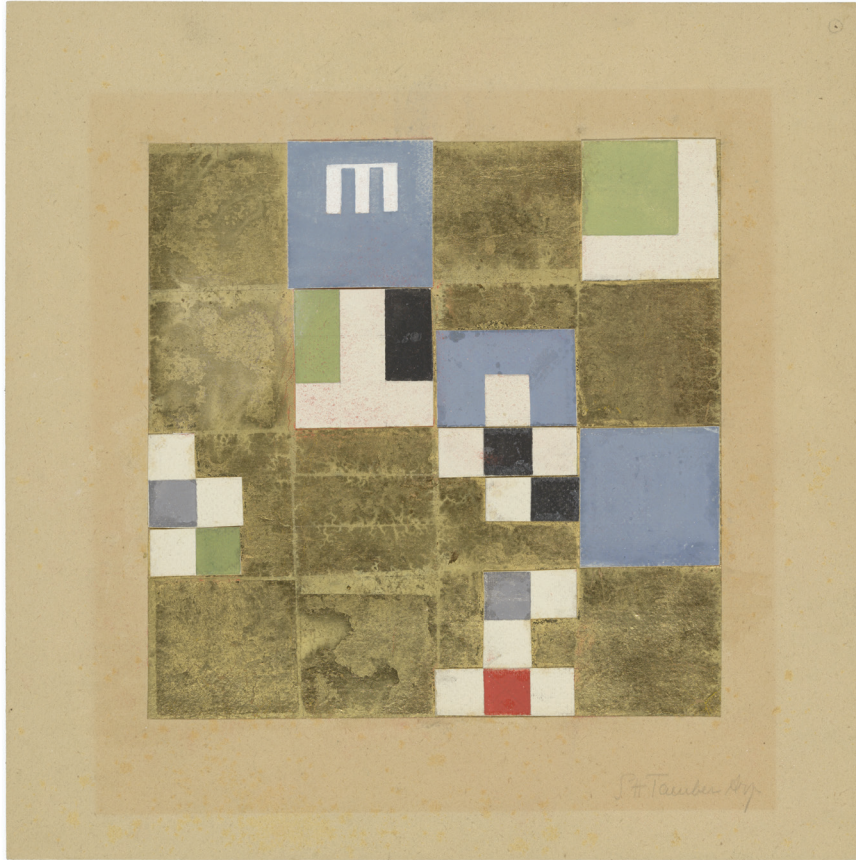


- 1 Unknown photographer, photograph of a dancer thought to be Sophie Taeuber at the Galerie Dada, Zurich, 1917, Berlin/Rolandswerth, Stiftung Arp e.V.

performed at the Galerie Dada in 1917, Ball describes “a dance full of points and fish bones, full of flickering sunshine and glare and a piercing acuity. The lines shatter on her body. Every gesture is subdivided a hundred times, sharp, bright, pointed.”¹⁴ Ball’s account creates a parallel to how Taeuber’s geometries operate in her contemporaneous artworks, such as *Composition verticale-horizontale à éléments d’objets* (Vertical-Horizontal Composition with Elements of Objects; 1919/1938) (fig. 2), with its squares of paint and cut-out paper that dance across a pictorial plane of shimmering gold leaf. It was through dance that Taeuber learned how to translate and interpret corporeal forms into abstractions.

Notably, Taeuber was the only woman Dadaist who was also working as a teacher. Even so, there has not been substantive research on her pedagogy in the Applied Arts Department of Zurich’s Trade School. Beginning in May 1916, Taeuber taught design and embroidery in the department, instructing students in how to work with media that were central to her own development of abstract

¹⁴ Hugo Ball [1917] quoted in Burkhalter, 2014 (note 11), pp. 228–229.



- 2 Sophie Taeuber, *Composition vertical-horizontale à éléments d'objets* (Vertical-Horizontal Composition with Elements of Objects), 1919/1938, gouache and pencil on cut-and-pasted paper on gold leaf on board, 30 × 30 cm, Berlin/Rolandswerth, Stiftung Arp e. V.

forms. She would teach these disciplines in the Applied Arts Department until March 1929.¹⁵ Although there are records of Taeuber's teaching, the archival documents related specifically to her work during the years of Dada in Zurich are insubstantial. This absence makes it all the more necessary to consider the centrality of both dance and textile arts to Taeuber's Dadaist production. She used woven textiles and beaded embroideries to push her visual subjects toward abstraction and brought the languages of dance and the applied arts into the realm of fine art. While Taeuber was working as a teacher, she was using the exact same media to inform her artwork that was shown in more avant-garde contexts.

¹⁵ Braverman and Krupp, 2021 (note 8), pp. 305, 308.

Sophie Taeuber as Teacher

An archived timetable for the Applied Arts Department shows that Taeuber taught collaboratively alongside a number of other teachers, including Alice Frey-Amsler and Berta Bär. Taeuber's students produced a range of embroideries, beadworks, and objects, from a cloth bordered in flora and fauna to an ornately beaded box to designs on lace to ornamental trim for fabric.¹⁶ During the same period, in more public contexts, Taeuber exhibited her own work in these same media. In November 1918, for example, she showed with the artists' association *Das Neue Leben* (The New Life) at the Kunsthalle Basel alongside an international group of avant-garde artists, in a presentation that rejected hierarchies between disciplines and media.¹⁷ Taeuber collaborated again with this association in January 1919 and January 1920, showing a group of artworks that included a beaded necklace and embroidered pillows.¹⁸ Taeuber's art demonstrates a clear relationship to works by her students, as can be seen in beaded purses by Lucie Turel-Welti.¹⁹ Although research remains to be done on the dialogue between Taeuber and her students, one aspect of this pedagogical interplay is of particular relevance here: the relationship between her simultaneous work as a teacher and a student and how this shaped her approach to her materials. Taeuber's abstract forms interact fluidly within her compositions, a lesson she would have absorbed as a student of dance and brought to her work in the applied arts.

After her Dada period, Taeuber published two pedagogical texts in German. The first, which translates in English as "Remarks on Instruction in Ornamental Design," was published in December 1922 in a teachers' association journal.²⁰ Taeuber wrote: "Always distinguish between the essential and the inessential. The object and its purpose are a primary thing. Give this object a simple and functional form. Ornament must in every case be subordinate to form. Try [...] to comprehend the nature of the material."²¹ Taeuber's second pedagogical text, published in 1927, was a drawing manual for female textile students and teachers, which she co-authored with Blanche Gauchat, a colleague in the Applied Arts Department. Diagrammatic didactic exercises accompanied

16 The "eMuseum" of the Museum für Gestaltung Zürich (Museum of Design Zurich), Archives of the Zurich University of the Arts, contains a number of interesting examples of works by Taeuber's students, which can be found under the search term "Taeuber," <https://www.emuseum.ch/search/taeuber/objects/images?page=1> [accessed 14.07.2021]. I am grateful to Laura Braverman for drawing my attention to this important digital resource.

17 Braverman and Krupp, 2021 (note 8), p. 306.

18 Ibid.

19 These works by Lucie Turel-Welti can be viewed in the "eMuseum" of the Museum für Gestaltung Zürich (note 16).

20 Braverman and Krupp, 2021 (note 8), p. 307.

21 Sophie Taeuber-Arp, "Remarks on Instruction in Ornamental Design" (1922), trans. John Gabriel, in *Sophie Taeuber-Arp: Avant-Garde Pathways*, Estrella de Diego (ed.), exh. cat., Málaga, Museo Picasso Málaga, 2009, p. 163.



- 3 Sophie Taeuber and Blanche Gauchat, *Zeichnen für textile Berufe (Dessin pour les métiers textiles)*, 1928, Zurich, Schul- und Büromaterialverwaltung der Stadt Zürich, Archives of the Zurich University of the Arts

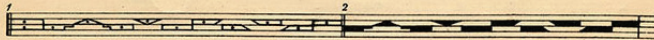
by various written descriptions (fig. 3) were “intended [...] as suggestions for further work [...] [to] increase students’ expressive abilities in form and colour, as different as their innate talents may be.”²² Although these writings are outside the chronological scope of this essay, they are important to consider in relationship to contemporaneous pedagogical writings and dance diagrams by Taeuber’s own teacher, Laban.

Taeuber’s body of work stands as an especially important point of connection between Laban and the Zurich Dadaists. Although Taeuber was studying at the Laban School of Movement, her body of work begs the question: Who was really teaching whom? Weaving these threads together, we can better explore Taeuber’s engagement with pedagogy across media. Doing so allows for a clearer understanding of how her different identities as an artist, a teacher, and a student all contributed to her singular vision of Dada. Naima Prevots has

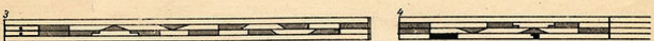
22 Sophie Taeuber-Arp and Blanche Gauchat, “Guidelines for Drawing Instructions in the Textile Professions” (1927), trans. John Gabriel, in *Sophie Taeuber-Arp*, Málaga, 2009, p. 170. The original text, *Zeichnen für textile berufe (Dessin pour les métiers textiles)* (Zürich: Schul- und Bureaumaterialverwaltung der Stadt Zürich, 1928), is preserved in the Archives of the Zurich University of the Arts.

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ORTHOGRAPHIE



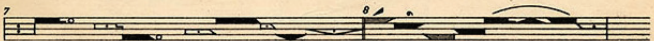
1. Die gewöhnliche Übertragung nach vor, seit-links, rück, seit-rechts, am Platz, links-schräg-vor, rechts-schräg-vor, links-schräg-rück, rechts-schräg-rück, am Platz.
2. Tiefe Übertragungen (leicht gebeugte Knie).



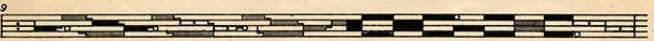
3. Hohe Übertragungen (auf Zehenspitzen).
4. Auf beiden Fußspitzen stehen. Gewicht auf das linke Bein übertragen und hohe Übertragungen.



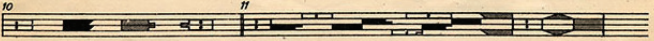
5. Übertragung über tief nach hoch, links-schräg-vor, rechts-schräg-vor, heranziehen. Pause. Übertragung über hoch nach tief, rechts-rück, links-rück, vor mit Wechsel zwischen hoch und tief.
6. Die halbe Übertragung (Gewicht auf beiden Beinen). — Das Gewicht bleibt auf dem rechten Bein — (Pause) — wird aber zur Hälfte auf das linke in der Schrittrichtung übertragen. — Die halbe Übertragung kann natürlich auch tief oder hoch sein.



7. Bein-Geste und Übertragung getrennt durch Pause. — Zeitunterschiede: lange Geste ($1\frac{1}{2}$), kurze Übertragung ($\frac{1}{2}$), kurze Geste (1), lange Übertragung (2).
8. Kraftunterschiede. — Im Bogen geführte Geste.



9. Übertragung mit Unterbrechung (Sprung). Beide Beine in der Luft. Übertragungen tief, mittel, hoch. Dann mit beiden Füßen abspringen (vom Boden), mit beiden Füßen auf- (auf den Boden) und wieder abspringen, mit dem rechten Bein auf- und abspringen, tief; mit beiden auf- und abspringen, hoch; links mittel aufspringen, rechts heranziehen.



10. Unbetonte Gesten im Sprung können weggelassen werden. — Mit beiden Beinen links-schräg-vor-tief springen, mit beiden nach vor-hoch, nach rück-mittel.
11. Sprung mit Geste (betont) des Schwebebeins zur Mitte auf das rechte Bein tief. Sprung aufs rechte Bein tief-vor, linkes Bein tief heranziehen; Sprung mit Geste beider Beine links-rück-hoch, mittel aufspringen; Geste beider Beine seit-hoch, hoch aufspringen.

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4 Rudolf von Laban, excerpt from *Schrifttanz* (Script-Dancing), 1928 Vienna, Universal Edition

argued that Taeuber “brought to the dance classes her own comparable artistic search for basic forms and structures.”²³ Even though Laban never performed with the Dadaists, he is known to have been a regular visitor to the Cabaret Voltaire.²⁴ He developed an abstract language for dance that he documented in his diagrammatic system known as “Labanotation.” While Laban was

²³ Prevots, 1985 (note 5), p. 5.

²⁴ Trevor Stark, *Total Expansion of the Letter: Avant-Garde Art and Language after Mallarmé*, Cambridge, Mass., 2020, p. 221.

developing this system in Zurich, Taeuber was expanding her own vision of abstraction across a variety of media.

Given the lack of archival records addressing the pedagogical relationship between Taeuber and Laban, we can take their writings as their own kind of evidence. Notably, Laban only published his first book, *Die Welt des Tänzers* (The World of the Dancer; Stuttgart, 1920), after his exposure to the Cabaret Voltaire and the Galerie Dada. Prevots has argued that in the absence of concrete documentation regarding Laban's involvement with the Dadaists, this chronology emphasizes the importance of Dada to the development of his ideas.²⁵ It was only later in the 1920s, after Laban had returned to his native Germany from Switzerland, that he published his theories and diagrammatic systems for teaching dance. He included various diagrammatic illustrations in *Choreographie* (Choreography; Jena, 1926), among them a schematic rendering of a dancer's limbs shifting between numbered points indicating directional movements. The year after Taeuber and Gauchat published their manual of drawing instruction, Laban presented a more substantial corpus of dance diagrams, including those in *Schrifttanz* (Script-Dancing; Vienna, 1928) (fig. 4). These dance notations – published ten years after the heyday of Dada in Zurich – can be read as a response to the relationships between forms within Taeuber's abstractions.

The similarity between Taeuber's and Laban's teaching diagrams reveals the connection between their pedagogies across media. And this overlap emphasizes that the teaching – particularly regarding the language and nature of abstraction – was clearly flowing in both directions. Buffet later wrote about how dance was one of the most all-encompassing means by which Taeuber arrived at abstraction. For Buffet, Taeuber's art existed in “a mysterious domain, of the same order, that we perceive without being able to express it and where there is maybe the only real *raison d'être*, the key to the mystery of any artistic invention.”²⁶ That ability to perceive and see without knowing the formula came as much from Taeuber's intuitive understanding of the interwoven iteration of textile patterns as from her own “dance sense.” In Taeuber's work, there is a clear fluidity across media and artistic identities, as she engaged simultaneously as a teacher, a dancer, and an avant-garde artist during the years of Dada in Zurich. Taeuber's pedagogical work reveals the connections between the realms of fine art, the applied arts, and the performing arts in her larger body of work. Of course, it also provided Taeuber and her partner Jean Arp with something more utilitarian: a consistent income that allowed them to pursue their audacious artistic endeavours.

²⁵ Prevots, 1985 (note 5), p. 5.

²⁶ Buffet-Picabia, Paris, 1977 (note 7), pp. 128–129. Original French: “un domaine mystérieux, du même ordre, que nous percevons sans pouvoir le formuler et où se trouve peut-être la seule réelle raison d'être, la clef du mystère de toute invention artistique” [author's trans.].

I would like to thank Anne Umland, the Blanchette Hooker Rockefeller Senior Curator of Painting and Sculpture, and Laura Braverman, former Curatorial Assistant, both of the Museum of Modern Art, New York, for their support and encouragement of my research. I also extend my thanks to Jana Teuscher, Curator, Stifting Arp e.V., and Rolf Wolfensberg, Archivist, Zurich University of the Arts, for sharing images as well as helpful insights.