The book jacket of Valeska Gert’s *Katze von Kampen* (1973) describes Gert as «eine tanzende, spielende, singende, kreischende, schwebende Allzweck- und Allerweltskünstlerin, Kellerkneipenwirtin und Kabarett-Chefin.» Gert (1892–1978), one of Germany’s earliest modern dancers and one of its most memorable cabaret artists, had indeed earned this reputation. Notably absent from this exhaustive list, however, is reference to Gert’s previous work as writer. Yet over the course of her life, from the height of her fame as a dancer, film actor, and performer in the Weimar Republic, to her exile years in New York as the owner of the famous Greenwich Village cabaret *Beggar Bar*, to her return to the Federal Republic of Germany and eventual rediscovery by proponents of the New German Cinema shortly before her death in 1978, Gert published four autobiographical texts. These, along with performance pieces such as her «Tanzlied,» reveal Gert’s acute interest in the aestheticization of her biography through text and performance.

Gert’s repeated recourse to autobiographical telling provides her readers with valuable information about her personal life, development, and career, but her autobiographical narratives must also be read as an integral part of her creative *oeuvre*, as a performance of the self, through which acts of self-invention are made visible, revealing the constructed and performative nature of the autobiographical «I.» Her works consciously blur the boundaries between *Dichtung* and *Wahrheit*, life and art, stage and page in an ongoing autobiographical practice.

Gert’s first book-length autobiographical narrative was *Mein Weg*, published in 1931. During and after her exile years in New York, she completed *Die Bettlerbar von New York*, which appeared in 1950. In 1968 there followed *Ich*
bin eine Hexe: Kaleidoskop meines Lebens, the most widely known of the four texts. Her last book-length work was Katze von Kampen, which was published in 1973. In these works, Gert tells of her life and relationships, describes her work on stage and screen, writes of her importance in the development of German dance and performance, and tells of her exile and return to Germany.

Gertrud Valesca Samosch was born to a middle-class Jewish family in Berlin in 1892. Most famous as a solo dancer, Gert also worked as a stage and film actor and a cabaret artist. She was part of the ensemble at Otto Falckenberg’s Münchener Kammerspiele during the 1916/17 season, most notably playing the role of Käthchen in Wie es euch gefällt. She worked in Max Reinhardt’s Deutsches Theater in Berlin in 1918/19, receiving critical acclaim for her part as Karaminka in Wedekind’s Franziska, and had several roles on the experimental stage Die Tribüne in Berlin in 1919/20, playing in scandalous productions such as Ernst Toller’s Die Wandlung and Oskar Kokoschka’s Hiob. Notable film roles during the Weimar period include Frau Greifer in G. W. Pabst’s Die freundlose Gasse (1925) and Mrs. Peachum in his version of Die Dreigroschenoper (1931). Gert also made appearances in several cabarets, including Reinhardt’s Schall und Rauch (1920) and Bertolt Brecht’s one-time «Die Rote Zibebe» at the Münchener Kammerspiele (1922). Although Gert claimed not to have been a cabaret artist until her exile, she opened her first cabaret, Der Kohlkopp, in Berlin in 1932. Like most of her endeavors, it was an artistic success but a financial failure.

As a dancer, Gert made her controversial debut in 1916 and toured as a soloist throughout Europe, including notable guest performances in Paris (1926, 1930) and the Soviet Union (1929). Gert’s dance is unclassifiable, and has been called «Tanzsatire,» «Tanzkarikatur,» and, most frequently, «Grotesktanz.» Her unique style, which included the use of montage and cinematic techniques, as well as principles of interruption, Brechtian alienation, and dissonance, stood in opposition to both the codified system of traditional ballet and to mystical and formalist traditions developing in German Expressionist dance, exemplified most famously by Mary Wigman.
series of jugglers, magicians, tightrope walkers and other variety acts, and her «Tontänze»—dances in which she also used vocals. Gert’s connections to scores of artists, including Brecht, Walther Ruttman, Sergei Eisenstein (with whom she led a long-standing platonic affair), as well as several of the Berlin Dadaists and Paris Surrealists, underscores Gert’s importance in the avant-garde culture of the Weimar Republic.

At the height of her fame, Gert’s career was tragically truncated by the rise of the National Socialists. Gert finally left Germany in 1939 and spent the war years in Provincetown and New York, where she founded her cabaret Beggar Bar. Following the war, she lived briefly in Switzerland before returning to Berlin, and she eventually settled in the Northern German town of Kampen. While still in Switzerland, she opened the cabaret Café Valeska und ihr Küchenpersonal, in Berlin she started the Hexenküche, and in Kampen she ran the legendary Ziegenstall. In 1965, Gert’s film career was renewed when she appeared in Federico Fellini’s Giulietta Degli Spiriti, followed by roles in, among others, Die Betörung der Blauen Matrosen by Ulrike Ottinger (1975) and Der Fangschuss by Volker Schlöndorff (1976). Only a few weeks after agreeing to appear in Werner Herzog’s Nosferatu: Phantom der Nacht, Gert was found dead in her Kampen house, and a eulogy was given by Volker Schlöndorff, who recognized not only her past artistic achievements, but her importance for the new generations: «Ihre Aufassung von Kunst, Sprache, Ausdruck und dem existenziellen Einbringen der ganzen Persönlichkeit deckt sich völlig mit derjenigen unserer Generation» (58).

Because Gert did not have a school or pupils, it is difficult to trace a clear genealogy of her influence. Nevertheless, her impact on dance and performance can be observed in the use of facial expressions, the experimental and revolutionary ways she expanded the physical repertoire, and in her innovative ideas regarding the use of music, the role of the audience, and the techniques of the actor/dancer. Wolfgang Müller posits that Gert influenced many without them even knowing (200), and The Biographical Dictionary of Dance states, «She was enormously influential in the American concert dance movement during the 1930s, through pictures and descriptions in the dance and socialist press; her appearances and those of Lotte Lenya were also very important in the importation of the German film and cabaret acting styles to American dance and theater» (Cohen-Stratyner 368). Müller also makes a case for Gert as «Deutschlands Proto-Punk,» indicating not only similarities between Gert and the punk aesthetic, but also referring to letters from punks found in Gert’s apartment after her death (216). Nina Hagen, Germany’s most marketable punk, even contributed to an exhibit in honor of the anniversary of Gert’s hundreth birthday.
Gert’s most direct influence can likely be traced to the experimental Living Theater. Both Judith Malina and Julian Beck were servers at Gert’s Beggar Bar, and Gert participated in some of Beck’s productions while in Provincetown. Malina writes in her diaries, «As the inventor of a visceral and vocal dance style whose «unevenness» (Unausgeglichenheit) immediately entered the mainstream of Expressionism, she had an acknowledged effect on the work of Eisenstein and Piscator, among others. Her pre-Artaudian «outcry» (Schrei) had a profound influence on Julian and me and, consequently, on the Living Theater» (463). American dance historian George Jackson suggests that Pina Bausch was influenced by the Living Theater (Daly 51), and Frank-Manuel Peter surmises that Gert therefore also has had a profound but underacknowledged role in the development of Germany’s contemporary Tanztheater («Zwischen Ausdruckstanz» 72).

Because dance and cabaret are ephemeral art forms, scholars must rely on videos, photos, and writing. Gert’s autobiographical texts have, therefore, served as an invaluable foundation for dance scholars. In Valeska Gert: eine dokumentarische Biographie, Peter employs Gert’s autobiographical texts, along with extensive archival research, to create an exhaustive account of Gert’s work in film, theater, dance, and cabaret, as well as of her personal life. Others use Gert’s writing to explore her revolutionary dance aesthetic. For example, in Valeska Gert: Porträt einer Avantgardistin in Schauspiel und Tanz der 1920er Jahre, Susanne Foellmer demonstrates how Gert’s play with tempo and use of montage are rooted in avant-garde aesthetics. Investigating the ways in which Gert’s dance parallels Brecht’s concept of epic theater and the ways she constructs a grotesque body, Foellmer explores how Gert’s innovative concepts anticipated later theater and performance art. Alexandra Kolb, Gabriele Brandstetter, Ramsay Burt, and Amelia Soyka all rely on Gert’s writing to examine how her dance aesthetic was rooted in the culture of the Weimar Republic and the development of German modern dance, emphasizing Americanism, changing body culture and new roles for women, as well as how new technologies and media expanded aesthetic possibilities.

With the exception of Peter and of Sydney Jane Norton, whose «Dancing Out of Bounds: Valeska Gert in Berlin and New York» summarizes Gert’s life and work, focusing on her exile experience and the difficulty of her return, scholars concentrate largely on Gert’s pre-exile dance career, and more research is necessary on her career in exile and in postwar Germany. Further, scholars tend to concentrate on Gert’s physical performance, but her texts, songs, and skits also provide rich material for continuing analysis. Several scholars have analyzed some of Gert’s shorter texts. Foellmer reads an article Gert wrote about the use of facial powder for the magazine Elegante Welt in
1917 as an example of her use of meticulousness («Übergrenauigkeit») as a means of achieving a grotesque aesthetic (119). Norton briefly mentions that Gert’s postwar political verse of the 1950s harkens back to the tradition of political cabaret at the turn of the twentieth century (112). Kolb presents an analysis of Gert’s unpublished «Tanzlied,» comparing it to the genre of the Bänkelsang, emphasizing its «basic paratactic syntax» and «dialectical idioms,» and contextualizing it within a paradigm shift in Gert’s larger understanding of art «towards conventionally lower forms of culture» (302). These studies allude to the possibility of considering Gert’s texts in the context of literary traditions. In light of this, Gert’s ongoing autobiographical practice opens intriguing possibilities for further study, for the texts require that we concentrate not only on her brief but important success in the Weimar Republic, but also on the creative work of her later life, and not only on her live and filmed performances, but also on her writing, which includes the four autobiographical narratives. These must be considered not only as documents of her life and performance, but as part of both her creative work and of a larger tradition of autobiographical writing.

All four of Gert’s published books fall under the general rubric of autobiographical writing. Philippe Lejeune’s definition is among the most cited: «Retrospective prose narrative written by a real person concerning his own existence, where the focus is his individual life, in particular the story of his personality» (4). Yet reviewers contemporary with Gert continually underscored the ways in which her texts differed from expectations regarding genres of life writing. Describing Mein Weg, the critic Schlee states, «Ihr Buch hat nichts mit den Enthüllungen pikanter Memoirenwerke gemein. Das gewiß ungewöhnliche Einzelschicksal enthält Monumentalität. Ein Mensch von heute wird zum Menschen von morgen.» Schlee constructs a division between memoir and monumentality, devaluing the personal revelations of the memoir. He prefers to read Gert’s narrative as a story of human development, regarding Gert – the woman, the performer – as a harbinger of the future. In Der Tagesspiegel, the reviewer Zivier simply identifies Ich bin eine Hexe with the vague designation «Erinnerungsbuch,» while his colleague at the Badener Tageblatt points to Gert’s own unusual generic description: «Diesen Lebensrückblick bezeichnet die Verfasserin nicht als eine Biographie, sondern als Kaleidoskop» (Ich bin eine Hexe). With the blasé title «Und noch ein Memoirenbuch,» an anonymous reviewer from the Kölnische Rundschau pans Gert’s Katze von Kampen, wishing she had never been encouraged to write the book in the first place: «denn Valeska Gerts wahllos gesammelte Gedanken und Erinnerungen, im Sog der modischen Memoirenflut offenbar ganz hastig zusammengestellt ... sind ein wirres Aneinander und Ineinander
von Belanglosigkeiten, zornigen Seitenhieben … viel Privatim und allerhand Anmaßung, aber auch Verbitterung» («Und noch ein Memoirenbuch»).

Regarding Katze von Kampen, Hans Sahl, Gert’s erstwhile collaborator, designates Gert’s text an «Anti-Erinnerungsbuch,» claiming, «Es straft eine Gattung Lügen, zu deren Gepflogenheiten es bisher gehörte, daß der Autor sich so vorteilhaft wie möglich präsentierte» («Draculas»).

Gert’s reviewers largely assume an undisturbed referentiality between the world and the narrative, praising Gert for her «freimütige Selbstdenthüllung» (Baur) and «schonungslose Offenheit» («Ich bin eine Hexe»). They read Gert’s works as important documents of both her life and of the time. Keef writes of Ich bin eine Hexe, «Sie [solche Bücher] sind als dokumentarische Zeugenberichte zu werten, und ein – wenn auch sehr subjektives – Dokument ist dieser Lebensbericht einer ungewöhnlichen Frau, nicht nur für die Zeit, die ihm den Hintergrund gibt, sondern auch für die Autorin selbst.» A curious tension arises between these referential readings and reviewers’ discomfort with how Gert’s texts relate – or do not relate – to both the world and to assumptions regarding genres of life writing. Only an anonymous reviewer from the Süddeutsche Zeitung, writing about Ich bin eine Hexe, emphasizes the textuality of Gert’s narrative: «Besessen von sich (ihrer Kraft, ihrer Kunst), ahmt sie sich nach in ungekünstelter Sprache, unbekümmert um die Gepflogenheiten der Memoirentliteratur, und läßt’s den Leser erleben» («Erinnerungen»). The reflexive use of the verb «nachahmen» implies simulation or impersonation of oneself, emphasizing the narrated self as a literary creation and underscoring a difference between the writer of autobiography and the subject in autobiography. While Gert’s language appears «ungekünstelt» – unaffected, genuine, or natural – this reviewer recognizes it as a medium of representation and imitation, and this recognition hints at different approaches the reader can take towards Gert’s autobiographical writing.

Towards the end of the twentieth century, a major shift in the understanding of autobiography occurred, problematizing a focus on facticity and biographical truth in order to emphasize instead the ways in which autobiography reveals the construction of the autobiographical self and challenges traditional notions of referentiality.8 Poststructural and postmodern theories posit a fragmented self, constructed in and through language, and challenge the assumption that language can transparently represent the world. Responding to these theoretical shifts, autobiographical criticism has interrogated new forms of subjectivity in the autobiographical act. In Fictions in Autobiography: Studies in the Art of Self-Invention, Paul John Eakin suggests that «[a]utobiographical truth is not fixed, but is an evolving content in an intricate process of self-discovery and self-creation» (3). Eakin’s work reveals
the porous boundaries between autobiography and fiction, considering the self as a fictive structure that emerges parallel to the acquisition of language and to narrative structures.

Feminist critics have been especially committed to challenging the traditional autobiographical subject in an effort to examine new possibilities for female subjectivity and agency in autobiographical practice. Leigh Gilmore offers a new term, *autobiographics*, as an interpretive strategy that concentrates on self-representation as it relates to the nexus of discourses of identity, representation, and politics. The elements *autobiographics* consist of include «an emphasis on writing itself as constitutive of autobiographical identity, discursive contradictions in the representation of identity (rather than unity), the name as potential site of experimentation rather than contractual sign of identity, and the effects of the gendered connection of word and body» (42). Gilmore begins her inquiry by dismantling «the belief that representation is layered over substance,» indicating the «seeming real» is largely fantasy (16). Her assumption is shared by others. For example, Shari Benstock employs Lacan’s theory of the mirror stage in order to demonstrate how autobiography «reveals the impossibility of its own dream: what begins in the presumption of self-knowledge ends in the creation of a fiction that covers over the premises of its construction» (11). These developments in our understanding of the autobiographical self and the referentiality of the text open new ways to read Valeska Gert’s writing. Her autobiographical texts are compelling precisely because they do not cover the premises of their construction. Instead, they point to the importance of creativity over chronicle, to the performative nature of the autobiographical self, and to the ways Gert fashions her life into a work of art.

Gert’s autobiographical writing is riddled with discrepancies (such as how many husbands she had and what their names were), with things Gert could not possibly have remembered (such as a lively telling of her own birth), and with stories that are clearly invented. Through their tenuous relationship to historical truth, Gert’s texts emphasize the importance of story over history. This is most clearly visible in Gert’s last autobiographical work, *Katze von Kampen*, which directly addresses this in the frame of the autobiography.

In *Katze von Kampen*, Gert’s tales are framed by an exchange of letters with Werner Höfer, a prominent West German journalist, host of the popular interview show *Der internationale Frühschoppen*, and regular patron of Gert’s famous Kampen cabaret, *Ziegenstall*. In his letter, Höfer begs Gert to write her autobiography, with an appeal to her captivating storytelling: «Aber Sie können erzählen so farbig und fesselnd, daß man Ihnen selbst das Unglaubliche glaubt» (7–8). Here, Höfer subtly calls the truthfulness of
Gert’s narration into question. He writes of «ihre Geschichten, die alten, längst bekannten, die neuen, vielleicht erfundenen aus Tausend und keiner Nacht,» using allusions to Scheherezade (and also earlier to Odysseus and the «Sylter Sirene») to align Gert’s stories with the realm of epic fiction. Indeed, Höfer calls upon Germany’s most well-known autobiographer, Goethe, who famously blurred the line between art and life in his *Aus meinem Leben: Dichtung und Wahrheit* (1808–1831), when Höfer reminds Gert, «Sie sollten, Sie wollten einige der Geschichten wahllos, ohne die Zwangsdramaturgie eines „roten Fadens“, niederschreiben, keine Memoiren, keine Tagebücher, nichts weiter als eine Art von Collage, „Bruchstücke einer großen Konfession“, um Goethe als Kronzeuge zu bemühen» (11). Höfer takes this quote from the seventh book of Goethe’s autobiography, in which Goethe refers to his poetic works as fragments of a great confession, implicitly challenging the strict separation of poetry and truth as it related to his life. As Höfer suggests in his letter, the border between *Dichtung* and *Wahrheit* is tenuous in Gert’s story telling. Not only are her tales highly subjective and often nonverifiable, but Gert consciously plays with these fluid boundaries on more than one occasion, visibly aestheticizing her biography and seamlessly merging her autobiographical tales with fiction.

In each of her previous autobiographical texts, Gert had told of meeting her lover, actor Aribert Wäscher, in the Romanisches Café in Berlin. In *Katze von Kampen*, she transforms the tale of their first encounter into a series of dramatic texts, which appear more like a screenplay or cabaret skit than an autobiographical narrative. Not only did Gert move the setting of their first meeting from the Romanisches Café to a friend’s intimate gathering, but she includes scenes where conversation happens after she leaves – which means it could not possibly be remembered, but must be imagined and invented:

A. Scheint eine Nonne zu sein. Dabei erzählt man das Gegenteil von ihr.
G. Alles Klatsch. (39)

These dialogues, which stretch across four and a half pages, tell of multiple encounters between Wäscher and Gert. The dialogic form sets this section of the text apart as an aesthetic construction, making visible the blurred line between autobiography and fiction and reminding the reader to be wary of all of Gert’s tales.

In contrast, in another episode, Gert leads the reader on, only to reveal near the end of the passage that she actually is telling a fictional story. Gert begins by describing Munich and the demise of the Augustenstraße in the postwar period, and tells a perfectly plausible story of trying to open a cabaret there,
«Mit Sigrid, Juliette, Traute zog ich nach München. Unser Programm, mit dem wir auftreten wollten, war originell» (101). It begins like many of the other stories she had told about opening the Kohlkopp in Berlin, the Beggar Bar in New York, and Café Valeska und ihr Küchenpersonal in Zurich. Gert tells of her frustrations with their landlord and continues, «Wir müssen den Kerl vergiften, holten Rattengift aus der Apotheke, schütteten es in die Suppe und aßen sie natürlich nicht» (102). At this point, the reader becomes concerned. Is Gert aware that she may be incriminating herself for attempted murder? The situation worsens as the landlord, rather than eating the soup himself, serves it to the guests, while the women perform: «Am Schluß des Programms gab es keinen Applaus. Kunststück, alle waren tot ... Wir riefen die Polizei, denn so etwas ist nicht zu verheimlichen» (102). This seems unbelievable, and at this point the reader may remember Werner Höfer’s claim «dass man [Gert] selbst das Unglaubliche glaubt» (8). As the story continues, the police arrest Gert and her colleagues, and they are happy «daß wir endlich Reklame bekommen hatten» (102). In reality, Gert was known to do drastic things for publicity, but by now, at the very latest, the reader must begin to wonder at Gert’s tall tale. The story ends with their execution: «Als unsere Köpfe in die Körbe rollten, klatschten sie begeistert in die Hände und riefen: „Die haben es verstanden, die müssen einen erstklassigen Manager haben. So muß man es machen, wenn man berühmt werden will!“» (102). Embedded within Gert’s autobiographical stories, this text only becomes clearly visible as fiction at the end of the story, and the joke is on the reader. As it turns out, the story is ultimately a critique of the culture of media and advertising, in which scandal sells and ethics are suspended in the interest of success. While the story may not be literally true, it addresses on a literary level Gert’s very real struggles for recognition in postwar Germany.

The above examples suggest that Gert saw autobiographical writing as a playful, creative exercise, and they raise questions about the nature of autobiographical truth in Gert’s work. Hans Sahl claims in his memoirs that Gert gave him a few notes and locked him in his hotel room to force him to ghostwrite her memoirs (the later Mein Weg). The attempt was a failure, and Gert allegedly chided him after reading his first chapter: «ich dachte, Sie sind ein Dichter,» sagte sie, «das ist viel zu zahm für mich. Es fehlt das Hintergründige, Dämonische, die irre Besessenheit eines Kindes, das am liebsten seine Mutter umbringen oder sich die Kleider ausziehen und nackt auf der Straße tanzen möchte, die wilden Spiele unter der Bettdecke.» «Aber das steht doch nicht in ihren Aufzeichnungen!» sagte ich. «Nein, es steht nicht in meinen Aufzeichnungen!» schrie sie, «aber ich dachte, Sie haben genug Phantasie, sich vorzustellen, wie ich als Kind gewesen sein muß.» (114)
Sahl’s anecdote suggests that Gert’s understanding of auto/biographical writing was not based primarily in referentiality or facticity, but in creativity and poetic truth. The poet is allowed – even expected – to take factual liberties in order to portray the «I» of auto/biography.

Indeed, Gert repeatedly indicates a creative approach to genres of life writing. In *Ich bin eine Hexe*, Gert tells how she was asked to write a resumé of her biography as part of her application for entry into the Soviet occupied zone in Berlin, «Dann schrieb ich eine Parodie auf meinen Lebenslauf. Ich dachte, die Russen hätten Humor; doch sie ließen nichts von sich hören» (187). Gert claims to choose humor over factual truth, playfully engaging – admittedly at an inappropriate time – with the autobiographical genre of the *Lebenslauf*. In 1967, the *Süddeutsche Zeitung* published a short text written by Gert entitled «Memoiren einer KIllerin,» in which Gert tells of her work on the short film «Une bonne dame.» The sensational title of the piece explicitly names the genre «memoir,» calling to mind what Philippe Lejeune has termed the «autobiographical pact.» According to Lejeune, autobiography «supposes that there is identity of name between the author (such as he figures, by his name, on the cover), the narrator of the story, and the character who is being talked about» (12). However, in the same breath Gert curiously undermines this pact by already suggesting a fictionalization, for the killer is not Gert herself, but the character she plays in the movie. In the vignette, Gert’s use of the first person pronoun «I» is fluid, slipping between the designation of herself, «Als ich im letzen Juni nach Paris fuhr,» to that of her character, «Ich war ein Vampir, nicht ohne Sentimentalität, denn ich brachte jedem eine Nelke an die Gräber…» Gert conflates the autobiographical «I» with the film character, telling of how she was injured during filming and responding, «Natürlich wollte ich mich rächen, ich schlug mit verwelkten Rosensträuchern auf ihn ein, vergiftete ihn und zerschnitt die Leiche, die nackt auf meinem Küchentisch lag» («Memoiren»). In effect, the autobiographical «I» in the text is playfully doubled, as Gert draws our attention to the curious double position of the body in her film performance, where it is both actor and character.

As Gert’s texts repeatedly transgress the boundaries between fact and fiction, life and art, the unified subject is challenged, not only by Gert’s fluid use of the pronoun «I,» but through the structure of the narratives and by calling attention to the acts of remembering that form the basis of autobiographical narratives in general. Structurally, Gert’s four autobiographical texts show a progression towards more experimental forms of narration. *Mein Weg* is largely chronological and is divided into two chapters, the first concentrating on Gert’s early life and personal development, the second
focusing more on her artistic development and burgeoning career. Die Bettlerbar von New York jumps back and forth between Gert’s exile in the United States and her early life and career in Europe, starkly juxtaposing the Wilhelmine bourgeoisie in Berlin with the bohemian artists and gangsters of New York, as well as Gert’s life as a European star with her struggles as an unknown exile. Ich bin eine Hexe: Kaleidoskop meines Lebens on one hand returns to a more chronological format beginning with childhood and ending in the present day Federal Republic of Germany, but the metaphor of the kaleidoscope in the subtitle also anticipates the fragmentary, shifting, and episodic nature of the narrative, as well as the circular repetition of situations. Furthermore, already in Mein Weg Gert had embedded excerpts of poems into the narrative, but in Ich bin eine Hexe the inclusion of her poems and performance texts at the end of the book creates an intricate interplay between the performance texts, which comment upon the narrative, as the narrative in turn adds another layer of interpretation to the performance text. Katze von Kampen is the least traditional of the four books, largely foregoing linear narrative and chapters for a series of fragmented thoughts and excerpts. The reviewer from the Kölnischer Rundschau refers to the «wahllos gesammelte Gedanken und Erinnerungen» and the «wirres Aneinander und Ineinander» («Und noch ein Memoirenbuch»). Gert interweaves cabaret pieces, articles previously written for newspapers and journals, and excerpts from her earlier autobiographies, as well as texts by others, including excerpts from performance reviews and from biographies of her associates, such as Sergei Eisenstein. Whereas the previous autobiographical narratives – although also quite fragmented and kaleidoscopic – gave the reader a sense of the chronology of Gert’s biographical information, Katze von Kampen deconstructs the traditional narrative and instead resembles a series of snapshots from the past, present, and even projecting into the future. Gert’s flexible approach to chronology and departure from linear narration has implications for the way we understand the autobiographical subject, for rather than a teleology that suggests psychological development and the evolution of a self, these types of breaks, as Sidonie Smith suggests, «subvert the notion of clearly defined developmental stages of growth . . . and the notion of a coherent core of selfhood (Subjectivity 71). Instead, the reader is presented with Gert’s kaleidoscopically shifting self.

Rather than create a teleological narrative of a coherent self, Gert’s texts instead convey the subjective experiences of specific moments, often calling attention to the act of remembering. For example, the narrating «I» often slips into the present tense to recreate the experiences of her childhood self: «Schnell will ich mich waschen, ich muß an den Strand gehen, ich halte es vor
Ungeduld nicht länger aus» (Bettlerbar 49). In Katze von Kampen, the narrating «I» relishes her ability to call up past memories: «Ziehe ich den Schleier von der Vergangenheit, steht sie leuchtend bunt vor mir. Ich habe die Gerüche stark und unverdorben in der Nase» (23). In a montage lasting several pages, Gert then describes short, disconnected episodes from her childhood that leave an imprint on her memory through her senses: «Ich rieche die Haferschleimsuppe, die Mama in meinen Mund löffelte, als ich Scharlach hatte, und ich spüre auf meiner Zunge den Ungarwein, von dem ich ein Gläschen bekam, um mich zu stärken, nachdem ich vier Wochen mit Masern im Bett gelegen hatte» (24). With these acts of bodily remembering, Gert allows the reader access to her subjectively mediated past through her sensate representation, drawing our attention to the act of remembering and re-creating the memory and to the ways in which her body functions as a link between past memory and present writing.

In the fictions and fissures within the texts, and those among the four different books and multiple smaller acts, Gert’s autobiographical writing challenges traditional notions of autobiography, for in blurring the line between fact and fiction, privileging creativity over chronicle, experimenting with structure and nonlinear narration, creating a fluid autobiographical «I,» and calling attention to acts of remembering, Gert’s autobiographical practice presents a challenge to the unified self and coherent narrative that formed the basis of the autobiographical canon well into the twentieth century. In her autobiographical projects, Gert moves progressively further from unity, until readers end up with what are admittedly fragments, Bruchstücke, and in contrast to Goethe’s Dichtung und Wahrheit, which was written to bring a proverbial «roten Faden» to his fragments, Gert’s last text admittedly eschews the attempt towards any such red thread and instead presents the reader with the kaleidoscopic, the fragmented, the a-chronological, the «untrue.» Gert presents us, then, with multiple, fluid versions of her self and her story. Linda Anderson writes that «the act of writing and re-writing confounds the notion that there is one definitive or fixed version of a self or a story» (9), and already in Die Bettlerbar von New York, Gert herself gestures towards this when her cabaret is taken from her and her group of collaborators is dissolved: «Und auch ich habe mich aufgelöst. Ich stehe am Anfang und muß mir ein neues Leben erkämpfen und gestalten» (33).

The use of the verb gestalten – to shape, frame, fashion, design, create – highlights Gert’s continual acts of self-creation in her life and life writing. It is a word used frequently in conjunction with the performing arts, which leads to questions of performance and performativity. Judith Butler famously claims that «identity is performatively constituted by the very «expressions»
that are said to be its results» (Gender Trouble 25). Smith applies Butler’s concept of performativity to autobiographical writing and concludes that «the interiority or self that is said to be prior to the autobiographical expression or reflection is an effect of autobiographical storytelling» (Performativity 18). As Gert dissolved herself (auflösen) and reconstituted herself in life and in text, her texts reveal the instability and provisional nature of identities that are performatively constructed, but also reveal the autobiography to be a performance of the self.

Gert’s autobiographical performances were not only textual, but were enacted on the stages of her cabarets, as she embodied and performed her autobiographical self. Alexandra Kolb draws attention to Gert’s unpublished «Tanzlied» (probably from 1950–1952), which Gert both wrote and performed (187–190). In the text and performance, Gert presents her autobiographical narrative in the form of the Bänkelsang, a narrative ballad, often accompanied by pictures, that originated in the Middle Ages and gained renewed popularity in the German cabaret tradition at the turn of the twentieth century. Taking the role of the carnival barker or market crier, Gert, the performer, speaks of her historical self in the third person, becoming both subject and object in the performance: «Sie sehen hier in bunten Bildern/ Das Leben der Valeska Gert/Sie sehen es von Anfang an/Nicht etwa umgekehrt» (qtd. in Kolb 188). In condensed verse form, Gert marks significant events in her life and describes her importance for the history of dance and film. At the end of the ballad, the speaker repeats a variation of the opening line that frames the autobiographical story, and reveals the ballad to be an advertisement for Gert’s Berlin cabaret Hexenküche, ending with the call of the market crier that invites people to a performance:

Sie sahen hier in einigen Bildern das Leben von V.G.
Und können sie immer wieder sehen
Wenn sie in der Hexenküche hier besichert
Sie zeigt Euch Menschen wie sie sind
Das Wahre und das Schlechte
Sie tanzt das Sündige und das Gerechte
Herein herein hereins[p]aziert und nicht geniert. (qtd. in Kolb 188)

Gert performed her past to attract a public for her present, employing autobiographical performance as advertisement. The use of the third person creates distance between Gert, the narrator, and Gert, the subject of narration, lending the illusion of objectivity to the ballad’s claims about this remarkable performer. In contrast, the actual performance collapses the figures, for the narration tells of Gert’s prowess as a performer, while the performance simultaneously demonstrates it.
There is an interaction between Gert’s autobiographical writing and stage performances that blur the boundaries between stage and page. In Die Bettlerbar von New York, Gert tells of the struggles she faced opening her cabaret, including financial trouble, problems understanding the New York city bureaucracy with its corruption and hypocrisy, and difficulties finding employees. On the opening night of the Beggar Bar, she transformed these tales into a performance, and then, in turn, wrote about the performance in the book: «Ich erzählte, wie schwierig es war, so ein kleines Lokal aufzumachen. Ich mokierte mich über Inspektoren, Polizei und die vielen Formalitäten» (31). In a circular process, Gert performed autobiographical tales, and then wrote in autobiographies about performing autobiographical tales – leading to a mise-en-abîme. In Ich bin eine Hexe, Gert includes cabaret texts that are loosely based on her biography, such as «Der Remigrant,» which deals with the difficulties of return after exile, thus creating a productive interaction between her stage works and her writing in which they mutually influenced and mirrored one another. Further, one could say her later autobiographies grew out of performance situations, as Gert allegedly spoke parts of Ich bin eine Hexe directly onto cassette for Jes Petersen, and the book Katze von Kampen arose out of her nights of autobiographical storytelling in her Kampen cabaret Ziegenstall.

Gert’s autobiographical acts – in text and on stage – are a performance of the self that constantly destabilize borders between life and art, borders that had been tenuous at best, as Gert continually incorporated performance into her daily life, ultimately making her life into a work of art. In Die Bettlerbar von New York, Gert presents her interactions as a young girl with men on the street as a theatrical encounter, framing her life as performance:


In retrospect, the narrating «I» expressed the desire to try on various roles – to live multiple lives and perform alternate versions of herself – to see the world as her stage and others as her «Mitspieler» or «Publikum.» Gert did indeed turn her life into a performance, even erasing distinctions between her public and private spaces when she turned her home into her stage, as she did with both her cabaret Valeska’s in Provincetown and the Ziegenstall in Kampen.
Her autobiographical texts are instrumental in the construction and understanding of her life as art, and reviewers of her texts clearly received this message. An anonymous reviewer from the Nacht-Depesche writes of her book *Ich bin eine Hexe*, «Spannend schildert Valeska Gert ihren Weg von Tänzerin zur Lebenskünstlerin.» Bauer perhaps sums it up most eloquently with language from the field of performance art, «Ihr Leben war ein Happening…»

In writing four autobiographies, Valeska Gert made her acts of self-invention visible. Blurring the lines between «fact» and «fiction,» privileging creativity, challenging chronology, and experimenting with a fluid autobiographical «I,» Gert’s autobiographical texts reveal a disruptive and fragmented aesthetic strategy that playfully destabilizes the autobiographical self and thus underscores its provisional nature. Gert’s writings do serve to elucidate her *bios* – albeit not completely reliably – but even more than that, they join her stage works as part of her artistic *oeuvre*, yet another performance of this innovative and enigmatic «Lebenskünstlerin.»

**Notes**

1 Although not mentioned by Gert or noted in any publication information, poet, critic, and novelist Hans Sahl collaborated with her on *Mein Weg*, as did Berlin gallery owner and publisher Jes Petersen on *Ich bin eine Hexe*. The extent of their contributions is unknown, but both tell of their partnerships with Gert rapidly failing. Stylistic similarities in all four works lead me to believe that Gert was indeed the driving creative force behind all works.

2 See Peter for extensive biographical information.

3 In *Ich bin eine Hexe*, Gert calls her own early dance «Tanzsatiere» (38), Soyka indicates the use of the designation «Tanzkarikatur» (132), and many postwar journalists referred to Gert as a «Grotesktänzerin» (Peter 44).

4 For a general history of the development of modern dance in Germany, see Huschka. For an investigation of Gert’s aesthetic practices see Kolb, Brandstetter, and Foellmer. Additionally, Foellmer offers a detailed comparison between Gert and Mary Wigman, the most famous of Gert’s contemporaries. She summarizes: «Die Charakterisierung der Gertschen und Wigmanschen Tanzkunst lässt sich grob in den Epischen Tanz gegenständlicher und verfremdeter Sujets und den Absoluten Tanz, der die abstrakte Form favorisert, differenzieren» (179).

5 For descriptions of Gert’s performances see *Mein Weg* 40–55, as well as Hildenbrandt, Peter, and Foellmer.

6 Gert claims in *Ich bin eine Hexe* that she left in 1938, but Peter suspects it was actually early in 1939.

7 Peter claims Gert was the first to fully integrate the face as a means of expression (42), Foellmer explores Gert’s use of exaggerated movements and facial expression to challenge notions of normative beauty and introduce an aesthetic of ugliness into...
dance (148), and Kolb observes Gert’s expansion of choreographic themes (172–84). Gert also suggested the musical technique of sampling «aus Wirklichkeitsgeräuschen» (Mein Weg 44), proposed theatrical innovations that broke with a realist aesthetic, changing the demands on the perception of the audience and calling for «den produktiven Zuschauer» (qtd. in Foellmer 204). For a deeper analysis of Gert’s theories in relation to other arts, see Foellmer 201–70.

8 See Smith/Watson 71–79.
10 From 1918 to 1935, Gert was married to Dr. Helmuth von Krause, whom she refers to as «Richard» in Katze von Kampen 27. From 1936 to her death, she was married to Robin Hay Anderson, whom she also calls Jack in Hexe 81 and Rupert in Katze 57. In Katze 31, Gert also mentions another husband after Krause and before Anderson, but this appears fabricated.
11 In Die Bettlerbar von New York, Gert had already alluded to this circularity: «Jeder Mensch stößt immer auf dieselben Menschen und dieselben Situationen... So müßte jeder Mensch zwangsläufig immer wieder die gleichen Fehler machen, so oft er auch sein Leben von neuem anfangen würde» (139).
12 According to an announcement in the Süddeutsche Zeitung in 1958, Gert had also written a film manuscript «zu einem tragisch-grotesken Musical-Film ‹Ein Emigrant in New York,›» which told of her own cabaret experiences and extended her autobiographical work into yet another medium («Die Kabarettistin Valeska Gert»).

Works Cited


Tucholsky, Kurt [Peter Panther]. «Valeska Gert.» Die Weltbühne 17.7 (1921): 204–05.