

Summer 1995 / 1996

14

writings on dance

Exploring the new dance aesthetic

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Exploring the new dance aesthetic

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BY LOIS GREENFIELD

P r e f a c e

This issue, *Exploring the New Dance Aesthetic* marks an anniversary. The first issue of *Writings on Dance*, published in 1985, focused on the practice of ideokinesis and its application in processes of dance-making and performance. Ten years later we return to this topic but within a greatly expanded frame.

Ideokinesis is one of a number of practices which have crossed from a therapeutic to an artistic arena. The technique has its roots in the pioneering work of American educator Mabel Ellsworth Todd who began in the late 1900s to develop a unique system of postural and movement re-education. Todd's technique of "Natural Posture", later termed "ideokinesis" by her pupil Lulu Zweigard, uses visualization to effect neuromuscular change. The efficacy and the creative potential of Todd's

methods soon became apparent to dance artists and teachers. Around the same time in Australia, and later in England, F.M. Alexander was developing and teaching a technique which would also profoundly change our experience and understanding of the body – its nature, its functioning and its potential for movement. These techniques have been incorporated into the training regimes of many dancers and performing artists and have not only transformed training but stimulated new thinking about processes of composition, improvisation and performance.

In a reversal of traditional dance practice where training is determined by and serves the performance form, here, it would seem, changes in training have precipitated thoroughgoing changes in dancing. New therapeutic practices and methods, and what could be termed new ‘philosophies of the body’, have given rise to new ways of dancing. Over the last twenty years we have witnessed the maturation and expansion of practices which began as supplements and supports to conventional dance training. Now it is not only possible, but important to identify and describe a different and new dance aesthetic, distinct from ballet and modern dance, and also from the eclecticism of late twentieth century postmodernism.

In the articles and interviews published here, a rich diversity of sources, interests and performance practice is represented under the rubric of ‘new dance’. Whilst the terms ‘ideokinesis’ and ‘Alexander technique’ recur throughout the issue, and have been formative techniques for particular artists (Eva Karczag for example), the issue of a new aesthetic is not reducible to any one technique or set of techniques. It could be argued, for example, that the impact of various Eastern in-body disciplines upon new dance practice has been

highly significant and that they have played an equally important part in the formation of the aesthetic.

Disciplines such as T'ai Chi Chuan, Aikido and Hatha Yoga, along with meditation and centering techniques have influenced the aesthetic orientation, ethical and skill base of a generation of dancers. What the artists represented here do have in common, despite their diversity, is a keen curiosity about the multitudinous ways in which thinking, sensing, feeling and moving manifest and shift in and out of focus as a person dances. This fundamental curiosity – what might in other settings be described as a research orientation – underpins their commitment to a reformulation of the state and art of dance performance; a commitment, in the words of Deborah Hay, to “playing” it differently.

— ELIZABETH DEMPSTER

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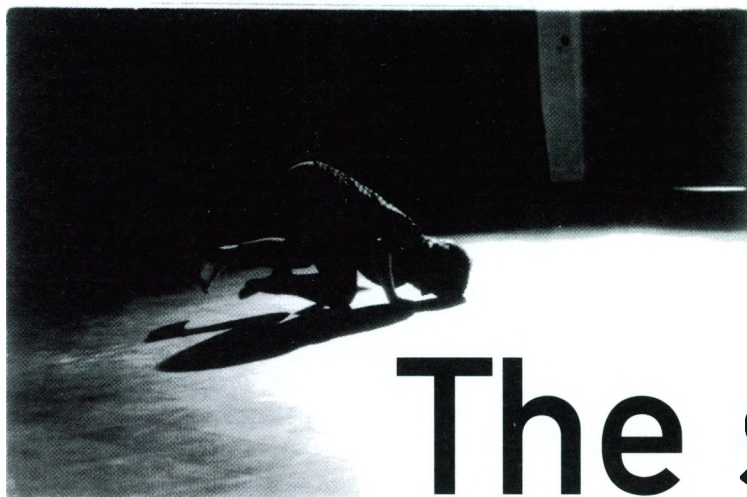


Photo: Lona Foote

The sensa

by LISA NELSON

I n t r o d u c t i o n To watch Lisa Nelson dance is to be drawn into an intriguing, complex and mercurial world. Her performance practice is richly inventive, but naming it so might wrongly ascribe to her work a quality of calculation from which it is singularly free. The article that follows, first published as one of the CNDO Documents (1992 Arts Archives¹), gives some insight into the processes and thinking which shape Lisa Nelson's performance practice. In discussion with students and staff at the Centre for New Dance Development, Arnhem, Lisa speaks in detail of her ongoing research into the relations between perception, image, action and desire. Since 1990 these interests have been explored further with choreographers/improvisors K.J. Holmes, Karen Nelson and Scott Smith in the context of the group *I m a g e L a b*. *I m a g e L a b* investigates meaning in movement through a "tuning score", originated by Lisa Nelson and discussed by her in this article. More recently they have set up site-specific Image Lab Observatory residencies in spaces and places throughout the U.S. and Canada. As Lisa has described it, "the Observatory is an invitation to enter into the nature of your own seeing".²

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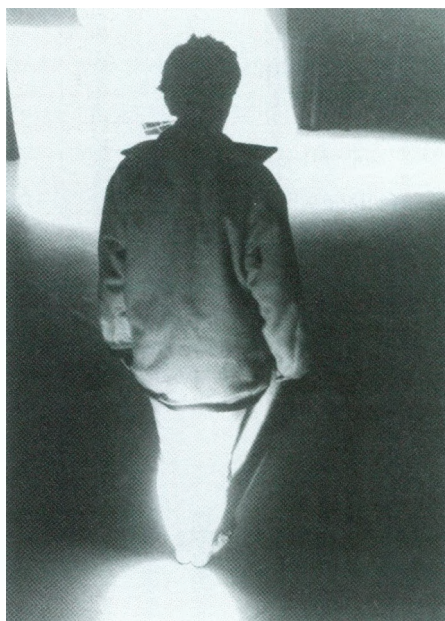
It's what dancing is to me.

It is physical sensations that are images. The thrill of seeing somebody move, the thrill of seeing sensation manifested in anybody's body is what I think dance is. And going through years and years of training, doing all kinds of dancing, it just keeps coming back to that particular focus. We could do the same activity and focus on something else and then perhaps it wouldn't be dance. It would still be imagery, but maybe that is what makes me so sure that I am dancing; it's the sensations of the physical body.

early

I never decided to dance. I started very young, at seven years old to make dances, touring. I had a very interesting teacher, a neighbourhood teacher. I started very early in a very innocent way. It was such an intuitive thing, a very unselfconscious habit, even though, as I worked through different stages within the activity of dancing and performing, of making things, I had to withdraw a number of times. But I started very young in this creative world, performing and making dances. And when I was eleven I entered Juilliard, the conservatory for dance in New York, in the children's division, which meant that every Saturday, from the time I was eleven to sixteen, I studied ballet and Graham and music theory and composition. I had a Saturday life. I never had a daily practice in dance. It continues to this day. This was very formative in terms of how I view what I do as a dancer. I have never really shifted out of this experience of not always dancing. There is always more going on in my life than just the practice.

I decided I wanted to continue to choreograph and didn't want to go to a conservatory to continue the technical training. I'd never



Lisa Nelson in
Image Lab Observatory 1993
Photo: Scott Smith

really understood anything about training the body from those classes. There was no information. I would just go to a class, and would go through a sequence, whoever's style it was. And that was it. But I was very lucky at Juilliard in that they had a lot of music accompanists who were amazing. They would improvise and there were some extraordinary musicians. I would love to spend the day at Juilliard because of the pianists. I could just dance because there was always music. Nobody seemed to bother me very much. And this is sort of the essence of a lot of things. The pattern from my training is that I was left alone. Nobody told me how to do things better or what I was working on. I remained happily ignorant of what the whole ritual was about. So when I was sixteen and was ready to go to college, I chose to go to Bennington College which was the only place where people choreographed at that time. I went there for a year and a half and didn't like it and I quit.

In terms of looking at other art forms for inspiration, I found music, film and a kind of theatre that was happening at the time – the Open Theatre, New York. They were exploring movement and sound, not just language and text. When I quit college, I joined a mime troupe and did children's theatre. I knew nothing about mime. I studied a little Decroux, but it was really right into the frying pan. However, the work of the Open Theatre really intrigued me, in relation to this much more personal movement which I was naturally inclined to. I didn't have much interest in the styles of moving that I saw in dance. If I remember back to when I was a kid and notice what appealed to me, it was the work of Alwin Nikolais. This was in 1958 to 1963. I was seeing Martha Graham, though not Cunningham yet. But the dances I loved were by Alwin Nikolais. I wasn't interested in his tricks, the psychedelic stuff with the moving cloth. But in the midst of all of this amazingly wild, abstract, synaesthetic environment, there was always a solo. And the solo was so detailed and so quirky. No one else in the dance world had any of these very bizarre little movements. That really appealed to me and was very inspiring.

I had to teach in order to make a living but I had no idea what to teach. I didn't have the vaguest notion what a technique class was, and I was hired to teach technique! That is when I started organising what I was thinking about: I could only start 'teaching' because that was what I needed to learn about. So my technique classes were based on the belief that everybody was ready to dance, that there was nothing wrong with your physical instrument. After I left Juilliard, when I went to technique classes at Bennington I felt such a lack of dancing in classes. In a way I had been in a hole and I turned to face that hole and I saw it was empty of dancing. So I tried to construct situations where people danced and taught each other. Many different ways of moving would be transmitted. I wasn't the only one offering the movement to be taught, and I didn't have a method of teaching yet. It was very improvisatory. For two years it was teaching learning and learning teaching. I was bringing people to their habits and asking them to dance from wherever they were at. Dancing didn't require two arms. There were no requirements to be able to dance. But after a couple of years I realised there was something built into what I was doing that perhaps was encouraging people towards long term injuries. It suddenly occurred to me that I needed to know more about anatomy. I wanted to know how the *body* learned things.

In my performing work at that time I was making large pieces for many people in big environments, and doing lots of improvised work. I started working a lot with musicians, improvising as a dancer, and as a musician. Then I worked in Daniel Nagrin's company. He was an interesting man. He had been with Helen Tamiris in the Forties. She was a choreographer and he was her main dancer. They were very involved with the social politics of the time, with a very humanist, almost socialist politics. In 1970 he was about fifty-five and he decided he wanted to make an

improvisation company. He approached his ideal of people taking individual responsibility within a group mind and offering who they were. His improvisational forms were inspired by the Open Theatre, based on theatre forms – encounters, emotional material based on or discovering conflict. People, instead of speaking, danced their way through these encounters. In the group he assembled, everybody had a different training. There was no physical training that we shared, so the movement languages were very varied. The work I had been doing before was based on musical forms. As a musician myself, I was familiar with basic forms of music...unison, canon, and singing, working with tuning the ear, tuning to each other, listening. But Daniel's work was more about emotion, very psychological and very exploratory and unformulated in a lot of ways. He was fifty-five and the rest of us seven people were between the ages of twenty and twenty-eight. There was this huge age difference which eventually became a problem in the question of leadership and vision. It was quite interesting. I lasted there for almost a year.

The significance of that experience for me was that I realised that I couldn't function in improvisational collaboration where there was a leader, where there wasn't an exchange on an equal basis in an improvisational format. I submitted myself to a similar experience once again about ten years later with a similar result. It helped me understand what I valued in improvisation. A year after leaving Daniel's company I quit performing. For the first time I really stopped dancing. Everything was telling me that I had to stop. I was twenty four and I stopped for maybe two years. To begin again I knew I had to make a commitment as an adult to something I had done unquestioningly since childhood.

When I quit, I found a video camera and I started videoing. It was my life raft. I started to video everything in sight. I got involved starting a community television station up in Vermont, videoing pig slaughters and local politics, whatever there was to do; stories, theatre, people working, people painting fences, everything. But I suffered so much for not dancing. I was surprised at how much I suffered. I didn't remove myself from the field. I was also videoing dance a lot. I remember going on a

tour with Steve Paxton, a contact improvisation tour, as the video maker ... that was painful. I really pulled back. I had to be on the other side of dancing for the first time, and look at it, and say what is this thing, this dancing. One thing I discovered was that emotionally I really suffered from not having that way to express myself.



Lisa Nelson in
An Abondanza in the Air New York City 1991
Photo: Lona Foote

next

I made some significant discoveries about my dancing by seeing how I saw by using the camera. I also discovered by not dancing how dance functioned in my life. I became completely consumed with seeing, how I composed my vision. I discovered that I didn't see visually, I saw kinaesthetically and from that came the whole next part for me which I have been working on ever since, the connection between my senses and my movement. I found that I organised the feedback that I got from the physical pattern of my seeing – the feeling from the muscles that move the eyeballs, the action of the lens, the sensation of changing focus from far to near; the myriad of muscles around the eye, the pressure on the eyeballs to change the shape of the lens; the movement of my head and spine. I was very active in the eyes. More so than my legs. It was such a big sensation for me. I began to feel that such feedback guided my choices more than visual feedback from light and I began to explore this with the different senses. I noticed that actual visual light reflection was not the most dominant feedback that I chose from the environment.

From experimenting with this experience with many people, I have observed that each of us has a rather special connection to our senses, and that some of us are stronger in one sense than in another, in terms of how much information we choose from the environment. A painter can paint by looking at form and colour or they can paint kinaesthetically. They can, for example, be more sensitive to the feedback that they get from making their mark and feeling the texture of the paint. I organise what I see more from one sense than another. However all my senses support each other, nothing is in isolation, lost, but certain ones are stronger than others due to personal experience etc.

When I put a camera to my head, I wasn't doing it like a robot, where my brain was on a tripod. I put it to my head and I was struck with how I moved my head following my interest through this frame. It reflected my way of relating to my body and the environment. I work with the medium of video through my kinaesthetic sense. In dancing, working without the camera, I find that when I shift into vision, just looking at light and form, I don't have any desire to move. I reach an absolutely still point. It doesn't activate my desire to interact. It is like this soft open place and I don't need to move. However, when I am actively looking through my environment with all my senses and I see something that attracts me, then it's a stimulus to move.

I also became absolutely enchanted with the idea that the eyes are almost constantly performing a double function – a communicative function and a receptive function. So as I speak with you and I am moving my eyes about, I'm sometimes shifting them to help me access my thoughts, and sometimes shifting them to let you know that I am speaking with you. Now I am speaking and now I am listening. All that signalling, all that eye language that we use so automatically, we have learned. We are experts at this language....but we don't usually have to attend to it, nor do we disintegrate it often consciously to learn a little bit more about its function. This double activity of communicating and receiving is so intricate, so visible, in the action of the eyes; more so than when I am posturally telling you things with my whole body. No movement seems as critical, in terms of this ability to communicate as the eyes' movement.

So I was very consumed with looking at the dancing while a whole other level of me was falling apart. During those two years I knew I was loosening the bonds of certain movement habits that were there. Through resting, not doing, I knew I was letting them drop away. That was one very good way to do it. Just to stop reminding my body of these movement habits, which I had no use for in my daily life. Pointed toes, for example, weren't reinforced by any movement in my daily life. Those stylised movements atrophied and disappeared in those two years. That was nice. It was self selecting. Living in the countryside since '66, there is a lot to do physically. After two years, I started dancing again and I felt I would start from the beginning. As a child I had never taken a beginning class. I was always thrown into the intermediate or advanced class. So this was my chance to be a beginner.

w i t h

I am very involved in collaborations with other artists. I'm interested in developing forms to use in beginning a collaboration, simple forms which reveal where my visions, images of theatre, interconnect with somebody else's in order to begin dialogue. My way of working, which has been slowly developing out of this interest in the activity of seeing, starts with a visual focus, but it involves all of the senses. We begin by locating through which senses we are experiencing the immediate environment. The senses communicate with one another; at certain times in certain environments, some senses are the major gatherers of information and others support that. The balance will shift depending upon the person and upon what prominent characteristics are in the environment. If there is an overload of sound, for example, or if it is very quiet, you might shift into a sense other than hearing to find out where you are.

One score I have been developing for initiating dialogue is based on a single or sustained image. It begins with both people

looking, with all of their senses, into the space, the environment. When one of us imagines oneself in the space we enter to enact that activity or relationship. The other observes. We wait. The mover sustains the activity for as long as it lives in their body. The observer watches until a desire crystallises for her to complete the image/environment and then she enacts it.

The image or desire to see yourself somewhere else in the space can arise through any sense, in any kind of activity. For example, if you simply see yourself watching from somewhere else in the room you would go there. You might turn your back on the space and read a book. You might join the other person very close. You might open the window and sing. How you complete this image could be through any kind of activity, so by doing this score we get an idea of where our focus is at the moment, what we are looking for, what is drawing us out into our imagination. For example after a long work session with Danny Lepkoff, I found that every time I completed an image that he began, I seemed to be causing his image to happen. My completion was what I had imagined happened before his image. And his completions of my images always seemed to be the effect of my image. It was as if he would do the future or consequences of my action. It gave us some information on where each of our imaginations were operating from, so we could start a dialogue about this. That was a first step. By doing one image at a time, together, we could start to see.

When I talk about desire, I am thinking about how we interact with the environment. Perception theory and the behaviour of animals and human beings acting in the environment indicate that upon perceiving something we may simply want to approach or withdraw from it. Where we place ourselves in an environment is a function of that desire – to approach or withdraw or to maintain one's space. There is a very particular pattern for each person at any particular time, and this awareness is what I draw out of working with people in improvisational contexts. A lot of my gathering of information about the process of sensing and expression, and its relation to action, is gathered through the teaching situation. With a group of people to provide comparisons,

we can start to identify a kind of personal hierarchy, a balance of which of our senses reach out into the environment and which ones are more engaged in looking at or supporting the internal environment, and how shifting between the two can bring us into action.

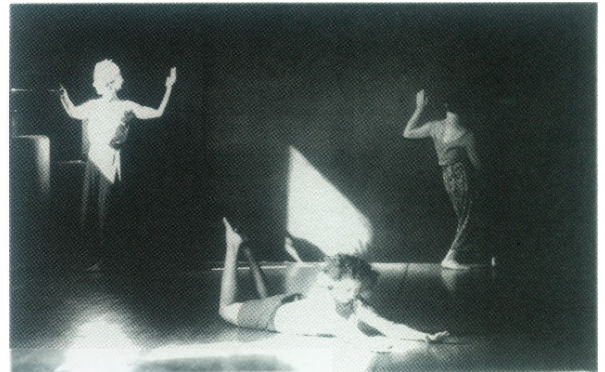


Image Lab Observatory Vancouver 1994
l-r: K.J.Holmes, Nora Hajos, Lisa Nelson
Photo: Ray Chung

There is this connection between the act of perception and action that I am most interested in and I have been constructing scores for groups to engage in this exploration. This is a variation on the other score. Everyone looks into a defined space and waits

until they imagine themselves somewhere in this space, and then they go there with their eyes closed, and wait. They navigate to that spot without visual information. Then everyone takes in the whole scene again and when someone else has a feel for herself being somewhere in the space, they also navigate there blind. Then the two people wait, blind, and make a simultaneous action. After this, the watchers on the outside have a number of words that they can use as tools to adjust the action. It might be to 'repeat' the action, or to 'end' it. Maybe just those two words. These explorations are ways of changing one's perspective, ways to discover what your patterns of looking are, what your desires of moving are.

If I ask you how you imagine yourself moving, for example, what happens? Do you see a visual picture, do you feel movement in your joints? For myself, I hear my movements. When I imagine myself moving or dancing. I don't see myself as a visual image in the space. It comes to me as a shift in density as if the space was filled with substance and densities that I perceive changing. This is the way I imagine myself moving. I think it is closer to the sense of hearing that it is to any other sense.

I am concerned with how an image gets built through the actions of a group of people and with how long it takes for an image to become visible. Internally I feel in my body a moment in which an image crystallises, when enough of the elements I choose from my environment move into a sensible relationship with one another. It is a tiny place where one can act with clarity. This doesn't mean that I know what action I'm going to make, it is just that the action is ready to happen. One of the practices that I engage in is to recognise that moment when I am ready to make an action and then I shift its direction. For example, if you hand me a glass, when I feel I am organised in my arm to reach for it, I can shift the action into another direction on any level, whether it is to lower that arm to support the reach of my other arm, to relax in my stomach, to speed up or slow down my response. In the moment of feeling my body organising itself to take the glass, I can shift that intention into another system in my body. I take that martialling, organising moment before it

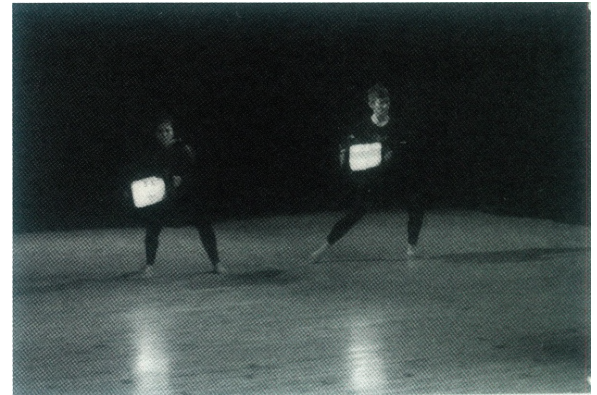
becomes inhibited. People, when they first try this, often inhibit the action. However, something has to organise first, before an action is made. Actions just don't blurt out of nowhere. This is an example of a practice, to look at those moments and become more aware of that shift into action. It is quite extraordinary when I watch someone do this. The action of reaching for the glass exists but as soon as it's organised you become aware that there are also other possible actions existing simultaneously. I am interested in making this choice-making visible. And I believe that these subliminal actions can be absolutely felt. This practice shows the body's mind at work, making choices out of a universe of possibilities. After all these years of dancing and watching dancing, I feel the need to manifest more clearly the activity of the intelligent body in dialogue with itself and the environment.

in

If I go to see a performance, an occasion for me, I am usually first the anthropologist. I am taking in as much as there is in the room – the architecture, the behaviour of the audience, everything that is there. And then if I am lucky, something happens that shifts my attention to something that is prepared, and I like that experience when I am shifted from that overall looking to something specific. I like to see a tiny dot and fill in the space around it, to see what accumulates. But there is no image without my participation. As a viewer what I feel in myself first is desire. There is my desire to make meaning from the moment. So I am constantly shifting from one sense to another in constant dialogue with my senses to construct my experience of the performance. In this synaesthetic way there is a constant shifting of which sense seems to be most prominent and which ones seem to be supporting, corroborating, in order to help make a complete image. The image is in me.

These moments of crystallisation or organisation accumulate for me in relation to time. I think it is very individual how it adds up and what elements one responds to in order to organise something. I see it as a constellation of experiences that make meaning. I take a very particular route to synthesize my experience, to organise. I automatically organise whether I'm aware of it or not and that organisation is the narrative experience for me. Sometimes there is something in the performance that draws me into a curiosity about the maker's narrative more than mine, when something calls and directs my focus.

At a certain point in my life, it seemed appropriate for my own survival to be more alert in more directions through more senses than usual. First, the experience of growing up in New York City and becoming habituated to a kind of alertness to that kind of danger. Then, living in the country, isolated, in the woods, with wildlife. To experience how to survive, to adapt to a new environment – that seemed to ask me to extend my senses in more directions than any one environment can give instructions for. When I go to the theatre I try to figure out what instructions



An Abondanza in the Air New York City 1993

Cathy Weis and Lisa Nelson

Photo: Esty Lowell

are embedded in the work because I am curious about the maker, what he or she is offering, how he or she is teaching me to see what is on the stage. I think it is necessary now with so many different ways of seeing, for the maker to provide me with those clues. If I feel this awareness is lacking, I am not as interested.

a t

Very recently I built a dance studio which has started a whole other evolution in my life. Before this, I was dealing with not having studio space and not having access to people to collaborate with, except when I was on the road. So for years I was making quick performances, which were very unsatisfying. It took four years to build a space, and it was completed about three years ago. I have been working very differently since it has been finished. I have been taking my time with long collaborations.

I love theatre and I have been looking at activities in daily life that bring me to this experience. I'm interested in the way in which the production of images connects people with their senses more consciously. I want to stimulate the awareness of the viewer that she/he is engaged in the same process as the performers, in the improvisational process of composing experience. And I have been trying to make that clear in the structure of the performances. I have been starting the performances with a group of people creating a sustained single image and then introducing spoken directions. The directions are tools for editing

the image, for example: reverse, repeat, end, etc. When an image becomes visible in the space, the desire to compose is activated. Certain actions, for example, can make you uncomfortable, they don't resolve satisfyingly to you. There is an accumulation through time of how much dissatisfaction and how much satisfaction you feel with the unfolding of meaning. You want it to feel right. You want to be able to organise something from what you are seeing. I want to make more visible the activity of making meaning, of making decisions. A performance must work on other levels of course without having to be aware of that process. However, to survive in this world it seems very important that people wake up. We have had to cut off so much. More and more. We've become habituated to being passive.

I am interested in movement. I am interested in communication, movement as meaning, and this guides me to investigate how movement is perceived. We take it in through our eyes, and we project back out through our experience. Are you looking at it just as forms and colours moving in front of you? Which sense you approach it with produces a particular experience. My focus at this time is on manifesting the activity of the imagination. Performing is a life long habit for me. Of course, I have had terrible battles with performance. I have stopped performing entirely at times and I haven't wanted to perform things at certain stages. I have had the usual struggle of being in front of people. I have given some terrible performances and known it. I don't like display. I am very shy of displaying a personal skill. I don't care to watch that in others. Something else must be operating. So I have to ask a lot of questions of myself to be able to show something. I have to know what my activity is. My work is not political in the sense of displaying slogans. It is to be seen with the imagination and I think it has to incorporate these values that I have talked about.

to

In the last year I have somehow decided that I am in a process of making something that will take about ten years to work out. I am finding ways to manifest this idea about flexibility of perception. I have found this to be most important to my survival in adjusting to this world. I want to manifest in front of an audience this process of flexing your perspective, so that as a viewer you are always moving. You are seeing from the outside, from the inside. You are seeing from the ceiling, from having just walked in the door, from having just walked out of the space. I am interested in making that flexibility into a meaningful experience.

English is my second language, dance is my first. In a sense I didn't learn to speak until after I was nineteen. I was very slow to learn to separate the meaning of words from all the other activities involved in speaking. Our cultural training in organizing meaning is not flexible enough. We need to practice the flexing. Travelling to other cultures puts a demand on our senses. As you cross a border, you have to be flexible enough to open your senses, you have to figure out the cultural signals, learn how to cross the street. It is always fascinating to go to a new place, to flex new muscles, to learn how to shape your communication, reshape it and wait and listen and feel.

I am intrigued with dancers who are working with the details of movement as their major focus. I find this to be rare. My study is simple in that it connects to my life at every moment. I can practice flexing all day long. This feeds into my making of theatre.

Contact Improvisation came in the middle of my development and it was absolutely crucial. Contact was an extraordinary exploration for me in learning about weight, and my first inkling that the technique of moving could be interesting. There have been other very influential moments of change in my life. When I stopped dancing and I started doing video I was learning something new for the first time since I was a child. And I let the tool teach me. That experience of learning something new was



An Abondanza in the Air New York City 1993
Cathy Weis and Lisa Nelson
Photo: Esty Lowell

1
NELSON

really powerful for me, for I could examine how I learned. Another influence was my readings on perception by J.J. Gibson who proposed the ecology of perception, and described the dialogue of the senses. And then there was my experience of working with Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen with brain-injured infants. Watching them, I could see the relationship between their movement and their desire, their perception and their action, which directly informed my experience as a performer and a maker of imagery. At present, I have done two years of my current work and I feel it is going to take another eight and I am very relaxed about it. I am learning about the work through teaching and performing these scores. I know what my work is right now. I feel very relaxed.

1 Prepared for CND0 and published by the Arts Documentation Unit, Centre for Arts Research and Development, University of Exeter, U.K.

2 "The Observatory is an invitation to enter into the nature of your own seeing. We are practicing a score that sets up a dialogue amongst the players by making perceptible how each of us senses and makes sense of movement. The dance unravels from the very first image. The basic activity of the score is tuning; the tools are actions and calls (eg. 'end', 'hold', 'reverse', 'replace' etc.). Each player continually tunes the image to his/her own desire. Together, our opinions uncover the form as it arises." from Image Lab Observatory handout, Improvisation Festival, New York, Fall, 1995.

2 The

An interview

Photo: Naomi Scher



“I came across a quote from the painter Mondrian. I don’t have the exact quote but I remember the little snippet of it that hit me. He said: ‘Pure vitality is the true content of art’. I think of pure vitality as our livingness on a cellular level.”

Releasing Aesthetic with Joan Skinner

by ELIZABETH DEMPSTER

I n t r o d u c t i o n "Skinner Releasing

Technique is an innovative approach to dance training developed by Joan Skinner in the early 1960s. In 1966–67 Joan's teaching at the University of Illinois spawned the growth of what was to become several forms of 'release work.' As these new techniques spread across the country, and since 'release' has been a popular term in diverse approaches to dance training, there arose a need to attach her surname to the work she continued to develop, in order to preserve its identity and to give its unique emphases a recognizable name.

Skinner Releasing Technique (or SRT) utilizes image-guided floorwork to ease tension and promote an effortless kind of moving, integrated with alignment of the whole self. Tactile exercises are used to give the imagery immediate kinaesthetic effect; spontaneous movement is frequently evoked by imagery and movement studies. SRT smoothly integrates technical growth with creative process.

Through the 1970s, Releasing technique was taught by Joan and the American Contemporary Dance Company, primarily in Seattle, Washington. The work continues to be taught and practiced today, deeply influencing many contemporary movement artists.'

— from the preface to "Releasing Dance: Interview with Joan Skinner" by Stephanie Skura, *Contact Quarterly*, Fall 1990

Last year Joan Skinner undertook a two month long teaching tour, conducting workshops and classes in various centres throughout New Zealand and Australia.

The following interview was recorded in Melbourne in July 1994.

Joan Skinner: When I first started to try to teach what I was finding after working alone for about three years, I was at the University of Illinois. I was teaching a freshman dance major. Marsha Paludan was my teaching assistant. Mary Fulkerson, John Rolland, Nancy Topf and Pam Matt were in the dance program in other classes. Mary Fulkerson was in my Composition class. She has reminded me that she asked me to teach them what I was giving in the freshman class, which I apparently did in some form.

I did this work for only one year before leaving and going to the University of Washington to teach. It was an amazing year because I was discovering as I went along and that process of discovery just changed the way the class structured itself. Musicians appeared as if out of nowhere and began to improvise with the class and it was just really electrifying what we were finding. When I left after that one year, Marsha Paludan called me to say that Mary, John, Nancy and Pam wanted to continue this work with her and they wondered how I felt about their continuing. I said but of course, of course.

By the way, the students in the freshman class are the ones who coined the word Releasing. I must have been saying we're releasing this and we're releasing that and so they coined it the Releasing technique. The group with Marsha continued to work together and at some point they all worked with Barbara Clark, who was in her eighties then and living right there in Urbana, Illinois. Barbara Clark's work comes from Mabel Todd and it is more anatomical in focus. Then they went out, each on his own or her own, although I think they became quite a network; they stayed connected to each other. They called the work that they were doing release work and I continue to call what I do Releasing because it just seems to be more in process, to have a more dynamic connotation.

But the word release work is just everywhere and I notice that even my work here is called release work by some publications. I'm hearing the term ideokinesis everywhere here too so I think it's become broader as a term than the work of Zweigard and Todd. These terms seem to have become so generic. But I think it's good to make a distinction between my work and release and ideokinesis. The term ideokinesis, as you probably know, comes from Lulu Zweigard's work and she was also a student of Todd. Her book is called *Human Movement Potential: its ideokinetic facilitation* and I think that's where the term originated. People have found different ways of working with ideokinesis but by and large it is anatomically based, the imagery is anatomically based.

[The development of the Releasing technique]

Elizabeth Dempster: You've led a very rich professional life, as a dancer with Martha Graham and Merce Cunningham, as a choreographer, an improviser, and an educator. I would be interested to hear how your discovery of the effectiveness of imagery came about. Was your development of the Releasing technique prompted by the demands of a particular sector of that dancing life, by issues that arose in dancing or in choreographing for example?

Well the imagery part came late, that came late. As a very young child I had my first dancing lessons with a woman who was teaching interpretive dance. She had studied at Colombia Teachers' College with Mabel Todd so her class certainly had something about it that made you experience moving organically, and she used images for children. Of course as I grew up I forgot all about that. I started studying my Graham and my Cunningham and my ballet work but something prompted me to start questioning some of these ways of working with the body. Or rather I think that I really just wanted to have time outside the class to work on the body itself.

I was in my five flight walk up apartment in Greenwich Village and I went out and got an old banister and set it up across an alcove with a mirror on that wall and a mirror on this wall so I could give myself a barre and see the back and the front or the three-quarter angles at the same time. I kept a little notebook and I would ask myself questions. What teachers

used to say to you all the time back in those days was "pull up, grip, hold on." Some still say this, I know, but many do not now. But this was it, pull up, over and over, and hold on and grip and pull up and hold on and I wondered how you could do that, pull up and grip and hold on and breathe as I thought nature intends that we be able to breathe. So I would take apart things from class that I just wanted to work on. Even though I was dancing at the time with Graham and Cunningham there just was something in me that needed to do this, or wanted to do this. And I can't help but think that that teacher way back planted some seeds, even though I didn't remember at the time anything about that. Then there was the classical thing of the injury during a brutal tour, a gruesome tour, an injury that would not seem to heal if I wanted to go back into dancing. This was around 1954.

A musician friend told me about the Alexander technique and there were only three teachers in the country at the time and no other dancer as far as I know had stumbled onto this. I went to see her to see if she would give me a lesson and she didn't want to take me on because she said dancers are too set in their ways – which they were then. But I persuaded her to try me and I worked off and on for a year or two, I can't remember exactly how long, but it made sense to me. It made it possible for me to dance because it had that sort of multi-directional thing in the body which is the opposite of what you're trained to do. You know you're trained to pull everything in, you pull into your centre, you pull everything, and this was just the opposite of that and it took all the pressure off the injury, and made it possible for me to learn how to dance again. I could dance, and so I thought it was marvellous. But I didn't study it to the extent that some dancers are studying it today. Some dancers are really making it their life practice and are even learning how to teach it and so on. I just took some lessons and thought this makes sense.

When I left New York I was still teaching traditional classes and choreographing, performing, and taking class, mostly ballet classes. Again something prompted me to stop taking class and to work alone and I worked alone for three years. What I was doing, I thought at the time, was applying the Alexander principles to a ballet barre mainly because that was so logical. I mean it's difficult to work on principles with a Graham contraction, but standing there just doing a plie, you can work on something. So I started out applying the Alexander principles, where I could take my time, where I didn't

have to keep up with the pace of the class. I didn't want to go through this gripping, holding anywhere; I wanted to find the multi-directional balance. So I would wobble around on my standing leg and fall and wobble around and fall and get back on. Then the structure of the barre broke down and I just worked kinaesthetically. It was at that point that the images started to come. Everything just broke down into another level altogether of working. And yet after three years I did go back into a fast ballet class and had a wonderful time.

When I went to the University of Illinois and was to teach a traditional modern dance class I knew that I had to bring some of this understanding to how the students were learning their technique. The images came as the metaphor for whatever kinaesthetic experience I wanted them to have. I saw how powerfully they responded to the imagery and that gave me the energy and courage to continue. Pretty soon the traditional class broke down because I'd say well let's go across the floor now but some people would just stay on the floor working; they weren't going to leave the image because something was going on, they were learning something, something was happening to them. So that changed, that broke down the format of class to where it just became a non-linear structure.

Then you're dealing with pure energy and I feel that energy has its own form, organic to its primal source and that's what I'm interested in. That's maybe what is not recognisable yet when you see it in movement. But some people do see it.

Why is it difficult to perceive?

Well for one thing it's quick, the changes are very quick in the dancing and mercurial and complex, the phrasing is complex. There are few, if any, repeats. I would get so excited when I'd see it happening, but then I would talk to colleagues who came from Cunningham or Graham who couldn't see it at all; they couldn't see it and I realised that there's a big difference here, a big difference. I do think that process has its own form, and I'm happy to find, or to stumble on, the work of the new physicists who believe that even chaos has order. This is an order that we may not perceive yet.

In dance we tend to think of processes leading to product and of course choreographers use processes in this way. They use the processes of improvisation to find a choreographic idea, to find a form. But I am talking about looking at things differently and looking at process as a product.

[The Releasing dancer] Traditional dance techniques as they are commonly understood are oriented towards the achievement of particular, already determined outcomes. I don't get the impression that the Releasing process is governed by predictable outcomes in that way.

In terms of form or technical skill?

I was thinking in terms of technical skill and the question of form is another. It seems to me that Releasing is an unfolding process, a practice that one is engaged in, irrespective of a particular set of outcomes.

That's right, it becomes an ongoing practice, yes. But people who have trained in it develop some of the same skills; they develop a deeper plie, flexibility in the hip, extensions, speed, fluidity, all of these things, but not through the means of a particular codified set of sequences of movement which is designed to develop those things. I like to think of it as dance that underlies dance forms, all dance forms, and that it can therefore, hopefully, be applied. One is available to learn any dance form, that's what I like to think is possible with it. But it takes time for that to be seen, for that to be realized.

For instance, there's a colleague of mine who has worked with me for about twenty years now, Robert (Bob) Davidson. He's taken Releasing airborne into low flying trapeze work and he has his own company now and does this choreography around trapeze work in a very unique way. When we had a school, we had a company and we developed a performance form out of the Releasing work and people would come to see the performance and they'd come backstage to Bob, espe-

cially to Bob because he was really the finest model of what the work can become technically. They would come backstage and they would say to him, where are you studying? Where are you getting your ballet class, come now, just quit the kidding, you've got to be moonlighting and taking a ballet class somewhere.

Because they perceived what? a degree of articulation, a certain clarity, line? Yes, technical brilliance and the kind of spiral thing in the body that occurs in the ballet; the ballet works in spirals, from the foot all the way through the torso, through the head.

But it takes time just as anything does; it takes time to have that work through the body and become dance. Although I haven't any sense of how much time or anything like that. As the work becomes more effective, as we find more effective ways of teaching it, it seems to take less time. But I don't know of anyone, as far as my work is concerned, who has continued to develop it into a performance form. What they usually do is just take it into their own dance practice, whatever they're interested in. There are dancers in New York who study this work and study it with me every year when I go there and they say that they use it directly in their own work and some of their work is very high impact. I've seen it and it's just crashing, you know, they crash into the floor or crash into each other, crash into walls. So that's another thing. They say they couldn't do that without the Releasing, but they're not examples of Releasing dance you see.

It's an intricate and interesting issue isn't it, that relationship between training and performance.

Well, the traditional training has the form already there. You're learning form, it's there and you see it. It becomes your model and you keep working with the body until it can conform to that form. You have the outer thing already. We've spent years developing our performance form of improvisation with musicians and the dancers, and to me when our performance goes well and they're really dancing well I see form, I see shaping, because that's what we worked at, how to do this. But it is so different from the look of a codified form, contemporary dance or ballet, because I think it's largely coming from energy, from a release of energy. So it doesn't look like a Cunningham or a Graham or ...

Does it look like Releasing though?

Yes it does, they say that it does. But if someone comes to see it who is looking for the other thing, they might not see it, they might not see

what kind of form it has. I mean it's not out there in the world where it can be perceived, although perhaps I haven't seen enough of what others are doing in terms of performance.

But for instance in relation to training, I understood when I was in Amsterdam that the release work, they called it, which was a requirement in the school (Eds: the School for New Dance Development) at that time for the first two years, did not lead to movement but was just mainly concerned with freeing the body and alignment. When the movement came in, it would be whatever each choreographer would be doing.

So there was an ideal projected of a perfectly aligned dancing body that would be created through the process?

That is an ideal, that is a possible goal, but again you didn't see it evolve, you didn't see the release process evolve into performance.

[The Releasing aesthetic] At the Dartington Dance Festivals (held at Dartington College, UK) in the early 1980s Mary Fulkerson, John Rolland, Nancy Topf and Marsha Paludan all presented solo concerts. It was possible over a couple of years to see the work of that whole group of people who had begun their practice of releasing dance with you. There was some kind of commonality in movement, a particular quality which I perceived in their dancing. It might not have been what they held to be at the core of their performing or certainly their choreographing, but there was a lightness, a silvery, effervescent, light quality in their moving, and they all seemed to do that or have that.

Did you say silvery?

Yes, silvery, as if it was hardly there, and soft. That seemed to be something that was privileged, that was highly valued. They're very different people, very different artists, and yet there was that distinctive quality in their moving.

Yes, I think that is there, that seems to have become a characteristic. Some of this work gets into high energy and very sudden movement, sudden explosive movement, but underneath it all is a kind of fluidity in the movement. When I was in New Zealand I heard for the first time the word 'soft', 'soft techniques', and I laughed. Maybe I'm just out of the loop so I don't know what some of these terms are that people have brought along, but 'soft techniques;' I haven't heard that before. I think that may have started with Eric Hawkins or something in his work but I thought that was funny to characterise them in that way. But maybe it's true.

Well I think that's a misunderstanding or it's an identification of a whole evolving process with a certain stage in which those qualities might be encouraged, especially if someone's been involved in a very brittle sort of practice. But it's powerful stuff you're working with and it would seem to me that it's not necessarily always going to produce a gentle quality. It's not going to do that.

No, no, but one has to go through stages, as you know, of letting go of fixity in order to allow something to transform. And so there is that stage of letting go and allowing, as I speak of it, and sometimes people get the misconception that this is a relaxation technique and I hasten to say that it's not, Releasing is not relaxation but that that is a stage to go through. Once you're available to the Releasing process, then you're releasing energy and power.

Ironically, softness could become a kind of fixity in itself, a sort of aesthetic fixity, a stylistic habit.

I think there are two possible issues here. One is that the softness can become a fixed thing and the other is that our culture, our western culture, hasn't embraced softness as a virtue and we're not necessarily thrilled by it on stage unless it's a limpid moment in a pas de deux, a romantic moment or whatever. But otherwise it would seem as if audiences and critics in the west really want to see dynamic movement. And there is the whole work ethic that we experience in the States, I don't know if you do here.

If the dancing doesn't look like it's difficult, hard work it's not valued? Yes I think that is true of Australia

as well.

It seems as if some of the new work is really going in that direction of hard edge and speed. It might be an expression of the times, this current sort of frenzy, it might be expressing something.

But as you were saying earlier the Releasing process doesn't necessarily produce just those qualities of softness and lightness does it?

No, no. Not at all, but I think it still has a little different look and I think it's because, at least in this work, one of our principles is to allow 'it' to move, allow something to move, to be released and allow the power to be released. When the power is released through the body it has a little different look than when you are making the power as you move. But you know, it hasn't been seen in the dance world and our company didn't continue because ...

Yes, I was going to ask you about the company.

[Releasing into performance]

For several years, we had a studio, in fact we had two lovely spaces overlooking the waterfront. We were fortunate to have it for a few years and then that area went into a steep recession and the landlord tripled the rent overnight and we had to give up those spaces and our school for the time being. Meanwhile our dancers had reached the point where they were starting their own families and we just didn't have a school where there would be more coming along so we just turned our attention to other things. So I don't think it's been seen. What that potential could be I don't think has been seen anywhere in the dance world because it would take time to develop.

And you worked

principally in improvisation? That's how it evolved over time?

That's how it evolved. When I first went to the University of Washington, there was a group of dancers growing with the work, who wanted to perform. I was choreographing then, but as the work evolved improvisation became an organic, integral part of it. It just becomes that in the classroom. So the dancers said to me one day they didn't want to dance choreography any more. They wanted to improvise. Well, I was relieved that I didn't have to choreograph because it did seem like two different things going on. So then we just turned our focus to developing tools and exercises, studies for developing improvisation as a performance form and it did seem more organic to the work.

The last thing I tried with the group was to conceive of a full length piece and to have the shape of it in my mind and have it in sections and so I knew what the content was. I had a conception for the costumes and collaborated with the lighting designer and with the musician in the development of the sound score. But instead of choreographing the exact movements I created an image cluster, I call them, for each section. We worked for a year on this because it was an experiment to find out what would happen if they kept returning to the same image.

We met twice a week for a year and I found that they could return to that image and that it would keep changing and keep evolving. Releasing creates a very different presence than the presence that you present in a choreographed or even in an improvised form. We had been performing improvisation but I felt to myself even then there's something that breaks here, between the Releasing that we do to prepare for a performance and then the performance. There's a funny little shift that takes place there. The question became how can I bridge this. When they're working from an image they're really working in a kind of altered state.

So the image was the bridge?

The image, focused on during performance, became the bridge, because that's the way they work in class. But I'd never really tried to have them work in that way within a performance and we found that they could. Then the question came, well can they do this in front of others? So I just invited in some Releasers to a rehearsal and found they could do it with Releasers. Then a few months later I invited some Laban people who are colleagues and mutually sympathetic and mutually supportive to see if the dancers could work in front of them and they could. So we worked our way towards a

public performance and they were able to do it, they were able to do that.

But we didn't continue with that because we weren't in a school any more, we didn't have people coming along. Robert has taken it into his own form of trapeze work but that way of performing never really fully realised itself because right after I tried that one piece we stopped. After we performed those two performances our supportive colleagues came backstage and said, well, when are you going to do it again? I said, I have no idea, I have no idea, but at least I learned from this that it can be done. The question was will it become a form that people can perceive? Is it out there? And they felt it was. The people who came were very supportive and seemingly very excited. So there it is.

[Teaching, teacher certification and Releasing images]

I've been going to New York for about 10 years every year teaching through Movement Research, but it was after I decided to take early retirement so that I could have more time to do my own work that the travelling and teaching started to happen more. Now I teach part time at the university for just two quarters and spend the third quarter travelling and we've always had our Summer Intensives where people have come from all over. We've done that every year at the university and we continue to do that. It's only just three or four years ago that I started teacher certification and I've only completed two groups so far. So that's also been an investment of time and energy.

And how long does the teacher certification program take?

Well

it's for the introductory work, for people who have reached a certain level of understanding in the Releasing work. It's a six week process which is very packed; it could easily be extended. During the Summer Intensives they observe the teaching in the morning work and then they have afternoon seminars. They have practical sessions with the partner graphics (that's the tactile work that we do) and they have a lot of reading, writing and sound and voice work; because I think that a big part of the class is how the images are presented into the space. The class is shaped by where the musical sounds go in and out, where the voice goes in and out and there are periods of silence. An image cluster is given after students have been taken step by step on the floor to be available to an image. I liken the image clusters to haiku just because they're brief and poetic and hopefully they send out some kind of resonance or reverberation. So the way in which they're presented is important.

So there's a concern for the whole aural environment of the class?

Yes, yes. It is important. Preparing a class is like a composition; the shape of a class is like a composition. It takes time to prepare and the music that we use takes a lot of research, finding and then selecting for a given moment in the class.

So there will be some things that are going to facilitate the kind of letting go part and there are others that will be appropriate for other parts of a class? Would you also have sound for when people are introduced to an image cluster for example?

Yes, well the image clusters are of different kinds. There are kinds that foster deeper states of stillness, and deeper experiencing and there are others that are designed for higher energy releasing. Then we have image actions, I call them. We also have a category in this work called totalities, totality images, and that is the kind of image where the whole self submerges, and really when the image takes, they (the dancers/students) just totally blend with the image and become the image. It becomes real, another reality, not an imaginary one but another reality. So there seems to be a kind of step by step process, a check list we call it, that is part of the letting go and allowing process. Then the image cluster is given and that can be an image action which leads into movement or into a deeper state.

I can give you an example of an image that we do at the introductory level. We have roughly three levels of the work – there's the introductory and then what we call ongoing, which goes on until someone's ready

for more advanced work. Initially the images are more accessible and then they become more complex, more sophisticated. The ability for an image to have an impact on a human being grows with the doing, so it becomes more accessible and more powerful as one goes along.

I am curious about the distinction between an image action and a totality image.

Oh I can give you a distinction between those. Remember that everything is prepared for the image and we don't just leap into it. Physically and in every way we have step by step ways of preparing. But an example of an image action would be: starting out with breath; the breath moves very much like the sea, it ebbs and flows like the sea, the sea of breath and the whole self can melt into the breath and float in it. Then the bones begin to soften, as they are floating they soften into sea sponges. They've already been given this area in the solar plexus as a space and so that area becomes a nest of sea sponges and the legs trail from that nest high in the solar plexus as long, willowy fern.

So this becomes the dance, the dance of the bones floating as soft, moist, warm, sea sponges and the legs trailing from the nest of sea sponges, high in the solar plexus as long, willowy fern. That is an image action. There might be inner stillness with it for quite a long time but then they do begin to move and you can see the change in the way their legs are functioning. An example of an introductory totality image would be that the whole self is floating in a pool, a crystal clear pool and some areas of the pool are shallow and others are deep. Then the whole self begins to merge with the pool, blend with the pool, so that the outer edges of us become the outer edges of the pool and a new moon is reflected there. So that does not suggest movement.

Where do the images come from? You mentioned earlier that the images first came to you intuitively or organically as you worked alone and later you used images in teaching to convey kinaesthetic experience; the image functioned as a kinaesthetic metaphor. Have the images you draw upon changed much over time or is there a body of images which continues to be resonant and that you tend to return to?

There is a body of images that we return to. But the work itself keeps evolving – and the images evolve with it. Right now I'm working on the Ongoing material trying to get it ready for the teachers. I have to pull the Ongoing material out of 25 years of notebooks and I am trying to get that ready. So it's partially just my own work but it's always connected

to a principle of some kind. It's not just poetic cloud-nine stuff. Not that you can spell out exactly what the principle is; well you can, but at a given moment that may not be possible. There's so many facets to this. It's not linear of course so the way in which one grows in it is in a non-linear way and I liken it to a web-like process. Each facet of the class becomes an aspect of that web.

Maybe I can give you another example.

They might experience something with a partner graphic of some kind of floating of the skull while seeing the spaces open, space inside the base of the skull, deep behind the eyes, or the dome spaces of the skull; we have all kinds of spaces. So they might be receiving some kind of tactile experience on their feet with a partner or sometimes on the floor, and then I might give a poetic image for the skull. There's an image that has to do with a whole lot of spaces in the inner landscape becoming like dark caves and if for instance we've been freeing the arms and the shoulder and the skull – I like to work with both sometimes because they're so intimately related – then the skull becomes the moon and the arms become streams flowing around the moon. It just takes it into another context but they're connected, they're related to what we have been just working with. Or we might be doing some tactile work along the spine and I'll give an image at the same time that's it's like electrical impulses travelling on the spine and out through the arms. And we have gossamer threads between the hands and they become activated also, so that there are ways of having higher energy things going on. I can't think right off the top of my head of an image that has people just exploding in the space and I'd have to see if I can think of one. Yes – there is the image that the whole self transforms into a configuration of serpentine spines. Serpentine energy releases its power – no warning! But those images still come out of something on the floor that has taken them to another level.

There was one person in the weekend workshop here in Melbourne who said that she could feel her legs transforming with the image but that if she started to move then they would start to lose it, so what should she do? and I said, well you just stay with it, you just stay with it and let it do its work organically. Eventually it will lead to movement and you won't lose it, it will be there for you. It is a growing process.

What is the role of the teacher in that process, how do you see that?

Well I have thought of the role of the teacher as a catalyst and of course guide. To teach it one must

have experienced it and in fact I say to the teachers that I train, if you're not living it, don't teach it. If you're not practising it as a practice it in your life, don't teach it because it's a living, breathing process and as you're teaching you're releasing as you're teaching. Not that you're going into the floor and giving yourself the work but you are in a releasing state as you're teaching.

Yes, you were talking earlier about the importance of the voice and it would seem to me that if you are not in that releasing state as you speak or describe the image it's not going to resonate. You will not communicate the experience.

Well then it becomes academic. Nothing wrong with academic but this is something else, something else. In fact some people who studied the work before I did any teacher training would take it and teach it and would begin to bring anatomical things into it, you know, they'd bring in pictures and graphs and so on and I felt that that broke the flow of the class. The student gets the principles as we go along but it's always done within the ongoing context of the class. I liken the whole class to a dance in a way so to stop and think about things in that way, using the intellect in that way, gets in the way of experiencing it.

[Perceiving Releasing] When you were talking earlier about the totality image and the sense that the dancer has of becoming the image, of merging with it, it occurred to me that something similar is happening when one is witnessing the Releasing process in another person. There is perhaps a very subtle way of perceiving this process in another person which entails a kind of merging. Or a better way of expressing that might be to speak of tuning, tuning to the image and to the dancer.

2

SKINNER

Yes, I think that would be just wonderful.

Well that seemed to be what you were describing when you were talking about teaching and the teacher's role and function in Releasing. Perhaps what occurs within the parameters of a class cannot be unproblematically transferred to a performance situation but this kind of interaction seemed to me to be precisely what you were describing. When you are watching someone and the process is working, you are in there with it; your energies and your attention are supporting and augmenting the dancer's process.

Oh yes, oh yes. It's an exchange of energy.

And in that exchange between a watcher and a performer the person watching has a crucial role. Their attention is productive; it does something, it has an effect upon the experience.

I think so, I think so, because I think that an audience affects a performance. Also I think that in performance the Releasing dancers start picking up on each other on another level. Without even watching each other they're picking up in some way. There is a heightened state of immediacy in their dancing and I think an audience can perceive that. There's a word that I've used about what, ideally, the Releasing dancer becomes physically. They are almost in a state of transparency and when I am watching that it's almost as if I have X-Ray vision. I sometimes jokingly say in class that I'm watching what's going on with X-Ray vision and that's a little joke but...

Like all jokes it has some truth in it?

Movement practice. Helen Poynor

Photo: Annie Pflingst



The art of
being in motion:
non stylized

3

I was invited to contribute to *Writings on Dance* in response to an extract from an article describing my experiences of movement training with Suprpto Suryodarmo in Java. I was informed that this issue would consider the kinds of transformations that have occurred as ideas and information have moved between the therapeutic and the aesthetic realms and contexts... Since my work has bridged these areas for many years I am pleased to have the opportunity to articulate my current approach.

In the past I have periodically found myself in a dilemma about where to locate, and how to describe, my work with movement as a movement artist, as a teacher/facilitator and more recently as registered movement therapist. The basic philosophy of the work and the understanding of the body is the same in these different roles although the emphasis and motivation changes according to the context.

I describe my approach as *non-stylised movement practice* but what does this mean? *Non-stylised* indicates that the work lies outside the parameters of prescribed dance forms. It is inclusive of all potential movements, there are no steps or sequences, no preset vocabulary. The work is based on the structure of the body and evolves out of simple movement tasks which serve as a springboard into movement.

movement practice

by HELEN POYNOR



Non-stylised does not mean unskilled. Movement avoids limiting preconceptions about the ways of moving which are or are not considered to be dance. Unfortunately as a term movement is often associated with a functional use of the body to the exclusion of expressive qualities. The word that is most significant in the above description is *practice*. To me *practice* implies an ongoing process in which one is engaged and to which one has made a commitment. It is a journey embarked upon which may not produce a quantifiable or predictable end result. It is not necessarily confined to one activity but has the potential to spill over into other areas of life. It is akin to meditation practice and is related to notions of awareness and authenticity.

A number of disparate influences have shaped my evolution up to now and contributed to this perspective. Having studied ballet when younger and theatre as an undergraduate, a strong interest in improvisation and movement based theatre led me back to non-stylised dance. I was involved in the Natural Dance Theatre and Workshop in London in the 70's which was strongly influenced by Anna Halprin's work at the San Francisco Dancers' Workshop. In 1978 I applied for the newly advertised Dance Therapy Course at the Laban Institute, London but was offered a place on their advanced dance course. Instead I chose to enrol at the Boyesen Centre for Bio-dynamic Psychology in London studying Gerda Boyesen's approach to neo-Reichian body therapy and massage. I believe that this decision was crucial to my subsequent evolution both as an artist and as a movement teacher. It was the first stage in a stripping away process which has continued in different ways in subsequent years. Rather than adding technical skill and vocabulary it served as a '*via negativa*' helping to dissolve physical and emotional blocks to the development of my movement potential and my ability to work creatively. It fundamentally

changed my relationship to and understanding of my body on a level that I believe dance training would not have reached, and made the next steps possible. The subtlety of the physical work and the quality of attention given to the body have also informed my way of perceiving and working with others as a teacher and facilitator.

For many years I felt pressured to make a choice between working "artistically" or "therapeutically", the prevailing climate in dance circles implying, as I think it still does to some extent, that the two were mutually exclusive. In 1980/81 I studied intensively with Anna Halprin at the San Francisco Dancers' Workshop in a group that was divided almost equally between those who identified as artists and those who identified as therapists. Her approach married the two worlds in a double spiral, a simultaneous process of moving inwards towards a deeper personal experience and outwards to a broadened artistic expression. In the years that followed I was engaged with a search on the boundaries of dance and theatre to create movement theatre which was authentic, arose out of improvisation and transmuted personal story into performance.

I was also exposed to other approaches to the body in motion. Feldenkrais was a significant component of the training at the Dancers' Workshop and was taught by Norma Leistiko in such a way that it was integrated in the dance experience. This has remained an important influence on my work to date. I studied Tai Chi with Gerda Geddes at the Place and trained with G. Hoffman Soto whose approach at that time was based on Capoeira. Tai Chi gave me an experience of grounding and of fluidity in the body. Soto's work developed muscle strength and stamina and took me through some of my personal fears.

In 1985 I became involved in the work of Suprpto Suryodarmo from Java. Suprpto has a body of stu-

dents and teachers in Europe and his work is gradually becoming visible in New Dance circles but it is still little known in Australia. His approach known as "Amerta Movement" (meaning Life Movement) has evolved over a number of years and is influenced by Buddhist practice and Sumarah, Javanese relaxation meditation. In a current brochure he describes movement as "not only a language for communication but also an expression of being". Although radically different from traditional Javanese dance forms in its non-stylised and process-orientated approach, it is Javanese in spirit. Suprpto's courses attract dancers, actors and artists of other disciplines as well as therapists and healers and people interested in movement as a means of personal development.

I was initially attracted to the work because of a total transformation of a colleague's movement after six weeks of study. The result was a fluid, strong and integrated way of moving which I had more desire to watch than most dance performances. When I started to work with Suprpto my strongest impression was of being 'seen' and being asked to move from a level at which I'd previously been able to elude both other teachers and myself. I had a sense of someone having 'put their finger on me' which was both disconcerting and reassuring. The second aspect of his approach which took me aback was that although the work was totally engrossing on a physical level Suprpto spoke to me more frequently about my 'attitude' than about my body. This was extremely confronting, revealing and releasing deep-seated patterns on a physical, mental and emotional level and clarifying the relationship between my movement and my life. Another layer of stripping away was taking place both in terms of my movement skills and in terms of my personality. At times I felt reduced to a gawky unco-ordinated six year old, at other times I discovered well-springs of vitality that had been buried for years. It was as if the move-

ment skills I had acquired previously were being dismantled in order to repair cracks in the foundations on which they were built. Subsequently those skills returned to be incorporated in a new way.

Studying with Suprpto transformed my movement, grounding me and strengthening my physical base; it brought me finally into an embodied way of moving. At the same time it increased my awareness in a way which affects not only my movement practice but also my daily life. Through the training I acquired the tools to continue to develop my movement practice alone without external structures and independently of working towards performance. I had a strong sense of learning how to do my own work. The same tools have since helped me negotiate significant life changes.

Suprpto's approach also challenged and enriched my work as a performer. There were immediate results especially in improvisation, in terms of timing, responsiveness, clarity and stillness. Subsequently the practice became a catalyst for questioning the nature of performance.

Ten years since first studying with Suprpto he is still the major influence on my work although earlier experiences have gradually been re-integrated. The following is an attempt to articulate my current working process.



My intention in movement practice is to follow my body in motion physically and with awareness without interrupting or sabotaging it in any way, without judgement or questioning, but allowing the movement to emerge as if clearing away sand which has blown over an ancient carving. Much of the time I don't succeed, but that is the nature of practice. It is the intention and the direction of the endeavour which is relevant and which gives the work its particular quality. As Suprpto once remarked casually "if you could do this you would be Buddha already". This clarified for me my expectation of success. When practising I attempt not to hesitate, not to censure a movement as inappropriate or unaesthetic, not to inhibit it nor to fashion it into something it is not but rather to allow the movement to unfold with both my physicality and my awareness fully engaged. The mind rather than controlling the body is in a state of relaxed but focused attention. Kinaesthetically I am receiving the changing states in

my body from moment to moment, aware of the whole body and of its constantly changing form, aware of shifting weight and of the changing contact between my body and the floor, feeling my hand on the floor, my shoulder releasing, the air on my skin, aware too of my changing feelings and states of mind. This is the ultimate condition glimpsed at moments, the reality more often than not is that one moves in and out of different levels of awareness.

The source of the movement is the body and the unconscious as it manifests in the body, rather than an external aesthetic, concept, image, or emotion, although images and emotions may accompany the movement or be aroused by it. The form of the movement is inherent in the body and the intention is to reveal this form as it changes from one moment to the next. The focus of the practice is not primarily internal rather the body becomes the meeting ground between inner and outer worlds. The aim is to be aware of oneself and open and responsive to the surroundings, rather than blocking them out or losing oneself in

facing page, top: Helen Poynor. Solo as part of *Catch a Space*, Hyde Park Dance Week, Sydney 1995. Photo: Annie Pflingst.
 below: Helen Poynor, *Salt and Ash*, a collaboration between Helen Poynor and Annie Pflingst combining movement and installation. Photo: Annie Pflingst.

them. This means being aware of location and direction in space and of one's pathways through it, aware of light and sounds and the physical features of the space or the elements of the natural environment when working outside.

The same applies to moving with others, being able to recognise and respond to those around me and still able to follow my own line. Noticing the changing distances between us, the configurations in space, and the different qualities of movement or 'atmosphere' in the room. In other words moving in relation to another without losing myself. This is an extremely challenging and revealing lesson in relationships, a clear example of movement practice as life practice. When teaching I generally emphasise working alone until students become stronger with their own movement practice. Although this may cause some initial frustration, removing the possibility of losing oneself by merging with another or by riding on another's energy, in the long-term it bears fruit in unique, surprising and moving interactions.

Initially the strong emphasis on the body resulted in me losing access to my imaginative processes which previously had been an important aspect of my movement. Until the relationship to the body is clear, the imagination can be a hindrance distracting awareness and diverting energy from the body so that the mind, or the emotions, are energised at the expense of the movement. There may be a strong internal experience for the participant but it is not fully embodied and little is expressed or communicated. The ideal is to allow the images to materialise directly in the body, with the movement giving them form rather than the imagination directing the movement. After some time I became able to follow the body physically while images unfolded in parallel with the movement. If the movement changed the image would also transform. Recently a fuller integration of the imaginative and physical response is beginning to appear in my practice. The images seem to arise spontaneously in my body, as if my body is inhabited by them. Rigorously following the movement allows them to emerge and come to their completion. The conscious mind, rather than directing the images or the movement acts as a witness to the process.

This mirrors a similar relationship between the body and the emotions. I will never forget the experience of moving with inexplicable anger surging through my body, and propelling me across space with extraordinary energy while the witness within my consciousness laughed compassionately. A memorable experience of emotion materialising in the body and eventually finding its resolution in movement accompanied by a spaciousness which was profoundly liberating.

A few years ago voice became a spontaneous part of my movement practice. Suddenly every time I walked into the movement space I would start to sing, not a known song

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or tune, but as if my voice had a life of its own. This was very disconcerting as for some time I hardly moved at all, it was as if my voice had replaced my movement. I had no guidelines about how to develop the work but simply endeavoured to follow my voice in the same way as I would follow my movement. I discovered a previously unknown capacity in terms of range and volume and an expansion of my breathing. I also experienced the sensation of my voice clearing the internal spaces of my body and of releasing areas of tension. After some time my voice became more integrated with my movement, the one informing the other. At times the voice arises out of the movement, on other occasions it is as if my voice draws the movement out of my body on a thread. I have a sense too of the voice being able to clear a room of residue from previous activities and create a protected space within which to work. It can also serve as a powerful tool when working with others.

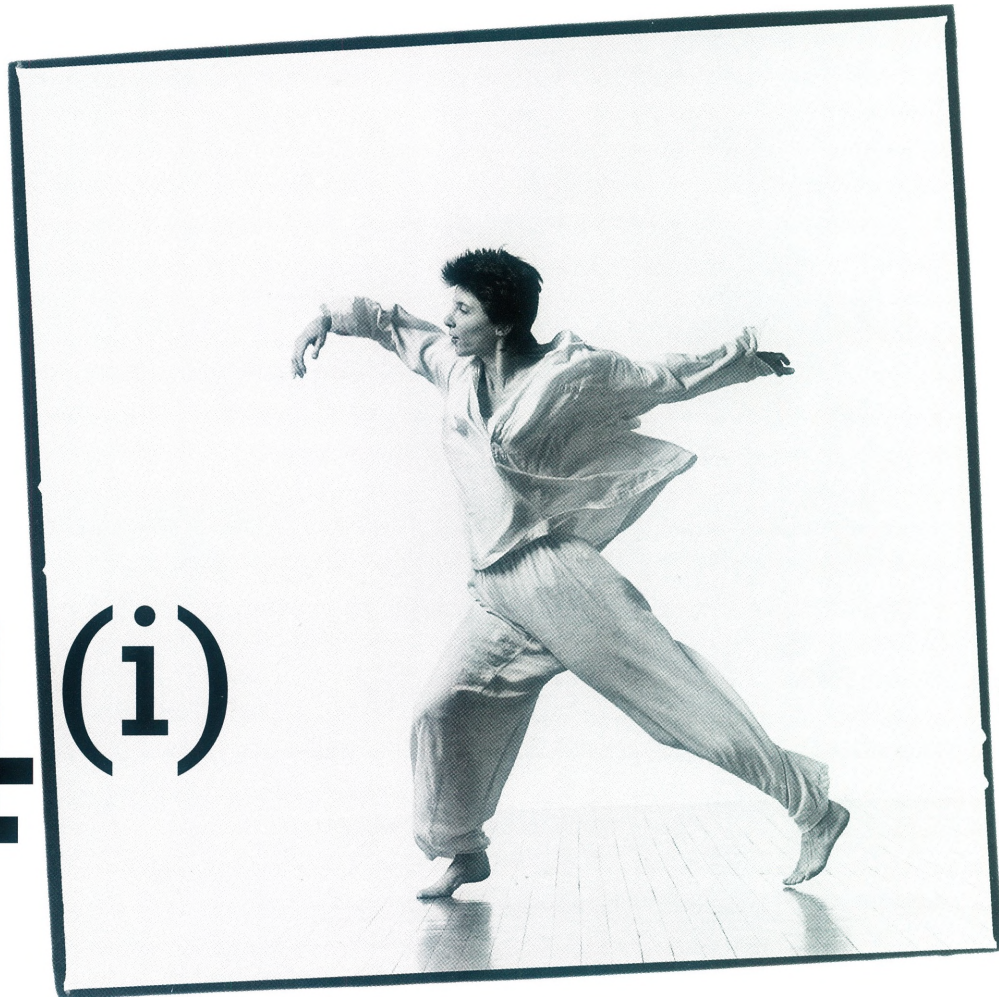
Receptivity is an important feature of this work, for example: receiving your physical, mental and emotional condition and receiving and therefore being able to respond to others and to the environment. In order to be able to receive you need to be able to “let go”, of bodily tension, of rigid attitudes, and of ingrained habits whether movement patterns or character traits. When working as a teacher/facilitator the principles are the same as practising movement. How can I receive the other, be aware of and relax my body and my attitude, give clear attention and recognise when to intervene and when to remain silent. This is an ongoing practice and one in which I continually feel like a beginner but I believe that we teach what we need to learn and find this way of working deeply satisfying as well as demanding. I have often witnessed how relaxing my attitude can have

a profoundly releasing effect on the work of students and serve as a more effective teaching tool than verbal interventions or physical demonstrations.

As a performer I have found non-stylised movement practice an excellent training ground for working with improvisation. The transition from this process to shaping a performance provokes many questions about how to structure and repeat material which has arisen spontaneously without losing its authenticity and reducing it to a formalised vocabulary. This way of working has also led to me to question the intention and source of performance and the spirit and situations in which I offer it. These are questions I am currently attempting to address. Nevertheless it is clear that the principles of the practice are equally applicable in daily life or movement and performance training. Practising movement is both practising as an artist and practising as a person. The less separation there is between the two the happier I am.

Moving

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Eva Karczag. Photo: Lois Greenfield

In the two workshop sessions that I taught during the 1994 Alexander Congress, I was interested in communicating my particular understanding of the Alexander Technique as it relates to the movement work that I am involved with.

My concerns lie with the experiencing of the body as a dynamic, 3-dimensional entity, constantly in movement – balance is movement – a finely-tuned instrument always available to change.

the moving

by EVA KARCZAG

I wanted participants to explore touch as both the giving of 'direction' and also as simply pure presence – allowing the person being touched to have the time and space to feel themselves being touched, just that. My work often includes tracing and defining, especially skeletal structure, feeling the 'true' weight of parts – a return to the reality of the physical body that houses us.

During the first session, we worked with 'back and up' somewhat indirectly – through helping our partner to fill their back with breath, and so make space for the softness of the front, that could now fall back into this expanded, breathing, moving – breath is movement – roundness, before the upness surged upward, lightening torso and head, and freeing the limbs.

During the second session, we worked with the organs, that is, weight and substance within the body, supporting its 3-dimensionality. Weight grounds our lightness even as lightness supports our weight.

I brought in my small skeleton (the 3-dimensional framework) that we touched, and many pictures that we looked at. I find that seeing the body illustrated in many different ways, from many different angles gives students an enriched view of themselves. I am constantly collecting illustrations as I research and teach, and as I travel and come in contact with people from many nations, with many backgrounds – medical, spiritual, artistic, etc. – who often offer me as gifts, copies of their favourite views of bones, muscles, organs, internal views, external views, views from above, from below, black-and-white or coloured – the body as landscape.

Because the workshops were experiential, I felt that rather than describing, I would instead like to offer some of the thoughts that fuel my work, and that I presented to the groups during the two days.

The following pages I envision both as linear pathway – whatever path the reader wishes to choose at any reading, and also as random access – a thought, some thoughts taken from any part of the text/image as meditation or nourishment for some moments or for a longer period of time.

moving the moving

through hands-on guidance and the use of imagery and stillness
being attentive to and interested in sensation
and learning to trust the innate intelligence of the body

developing patterns of expansion and free flow of movement
opening the possibility of making informed choices
moving in more efficient and integrated ways

exploring stillness as the place where subtle inner movement can be perceived
within the stillness, through touch and image, time and space can expand

within the perception of inner expansion, embracing the idea that
movement can fill any expanding space within the body

softness and falling, expansion and filling
emptiness and availability, openness to possibilities

inner movement leads to movement through the space
thought becoming a physical reality in the body

as a beginning, using the floor
moving through the simple developmental actions of rolling and crawling
a gradual journey upward towards and into the upright,
into standing, walking and running

within moving,
finding the integration of the new information, the new experience of body
stretching the availability of movement within each individual
– physically, emotionally, imaginatively.

less about being forceful, more about allowing
less about being wilful, more about being willing

a delight in deeply sensed, deeply understood and fully physicalised moving

attention filling your whole body

your body has length and width *and* depth



sometimes a beginning is slow and full of sensation
sometimes the body is open and available – ready for anything

breathing with whole body not just with lungs

hand touching partner's back to draw awareness, breath to the place touched

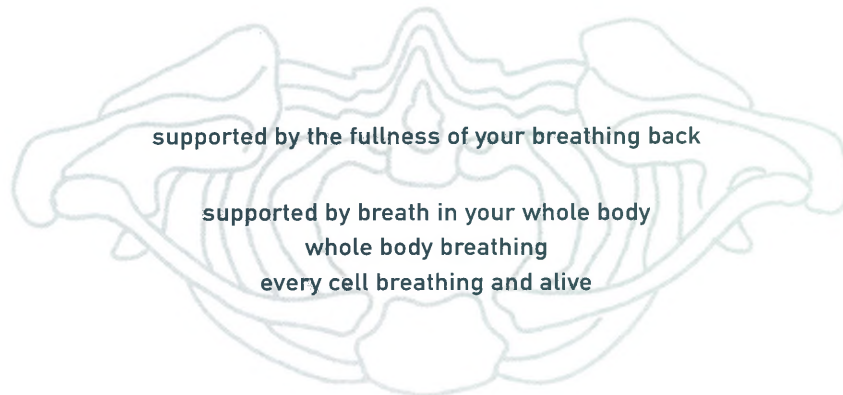
this is a hand that doesn't want, that doesn't know what's right or wrong
 this is a hand that gives space and time for whatever needs to happen
 this is a hand that draws awareness, attention – mindfulness to this place so that it can fill
 with breath

breath is like water – it can't be pushed
 but if you open space for it, it will rush in to fill this space

letting your whole back breathe, as fully as it is capable of, at this moment in time

not more – this is not about pushing
 not less – this is not about holding back or withholding

simply allowing what needs to happen to happen



supported by the fullness of your breathing back

supported by breath in your whole body
 whole body breathing
 every cell breathing and alive

use your breath
 let inner space, and movement inside your body support you
 this is inner expansion

breathing is expansion – it is also softening, falling towards centre
 breathing is filling– it is also emptying
 breathing is movement – it is also the experience of stillness

moving through the space
 use the air – air like water – find your buoyancy – find your lightness

breathing into
 the fullness of your back, the softness of your front
 and the light, delicate balance of your head

breath expanding into limbs and extremities
 hands, feet, head, tail: whole body breathing, in movement and at rest

organs supporting the body's three-dimensionality

placing hands over partner's body and gently rocking to help settle organs
sifting body weight downward
letting weight settle

breathing into the weight of each organ

consider weight – and a generosity in giving
consider breath – and a generosity in taking and returning
consider having arrived – and a generosity in presence
consider energy – and an abundance
consider emptiness – being open, available, willing
consider fullness – being full of possibility, full of movement

organs are fluid weight within the body and support your 3-dimensionality
organs are fluid weight within the body and give substance to your volume

full back, soft front – your body is round and full and easeful
a round body, a moving container filled with moving content

breath massages the organs
moving massages the organs

within moving

finding the integration of the new information, the new experience of body

moving into unusual spaces within your body, moving in unusual ways through the space

this is about fearlessly filling any possibility with movement

this is a place where there is no judgement – no thinking about should or can't
this is a place where moving is

whole body weighted, whole body breathing
weight and lightness existing together, balancing each other

Eva Karczag. Photo: Lois Greenfield



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Explorations within
the New Dance Aesthetic ...

I n t r o d u c t i o n In a 1992 issue of *Direction: a journal on the Alexander technique*, Eva Karczag writes succinctly of the techniques and movement philosophies which inform her practice as an artist and teacher. An excerpt from that article is reprinted here alongside an interview with Eva which was conducted in August 1994 at Dancehouse, Centre for Moving Arts, Melbourne. In Melbourne as part of an Australia-wide tour, Eva taught workshops (entitled *Explorations within the New Dance Aesthetic*) and presented *Horizon Rerun*, a solo performance based upon an earlier group piece (*Horizon*). The interview opens with a detailed discussion of the making of that original work and it is in this discussion that Eva's unique approach to training and performance-making is revealed.

As Yet Untitled

Eva Karczag

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Coming to the Alexander Technique from a dance background, I realise I was fortunate in two respects: firstly, movement was and is my motivating force, and secondly, I had already come in contact with ways of thinking

Interview

EVA KARCZAG I see that the people I come in contact with have a very particular way of moving, especially people who've worked with me over a long period of time. I know it comes from ways of thinking about moving that I've been playing around with for a long time. One of the things that many people said about *Horizon*, the piece that I made recently with the students at Arnhem, was that it was so great to see people moving in such a full way. ELIZABETH DEMPSTER Well, let's talk about that piece. How long did you work? When choreographers are brought in to EDDC^I to make a piece for the students they are usually given a ten week

article by

An interview with **Eva Karczag** by ELIZABETH DEMPSTER

about movement and dance other than those of traditional and modern dance forms through the study of the T'ai Chi Chuan and through an introduction to anatomical release work.

During the many years that I have spent studying and exploring different techniques, ideas and ways of seeing and experiencing movement, it is the Alexander Technique, the T'ai Chi Chuan, and release and improvisational dance forms that have had the most profound influence on me. It is primarily a synthesis of these techniques, and their philosophies, that I incorporate in my work, both as a dancer/choreographer and as a teacher of dance and the Alexander Technique. As these techniques have exerted their influence on me, they have, at the same time, exerted their influence on each other.

They contain certain similarities in the way they look at and deal with the individual. These similarities are the essence of my work. They all acknowledge that body and mind are inseparable. They all acknowledge the idea that each of us is a unique individual containing unlimited inner resources of creativity and that the more fully we recognise and learn to use ourselves with awareness, the clearer and more powerful our expression can be.

They all acknowledge process and that all growth, all change takes time. They all emphasise undoing – undoing habit, undoing preconceived ideas of body and mind – to recover a natural freedom of movement and thought. Moving happens not through excess muscular tension, but

block of time for rehearsals, so basically I had ten weeks, nine and a half weeks of rehearsal and half a week of performance. But because I teach at the school year round, the students I chose to work with had all studied with me before so were familiar with many of my processes. Of course, class work is different to making a piece, and we all learned a lot.

One of the aims of the performance projects is to give the students a chance to work with different choreographers and also to create a piece and perform it in more professional situations. Often the pieces are taken out on the road to see how it is to perform in different venues.

And what was your process? Were you choreographing material or was it a structured improvisation? How are you thinking of your role in a project such as this?

I don't like being in the directing role, telling people what to do – I usually do solo work or collaborations – so I had to figure out a way where it would feel comfortable for me to be the person whose idea was being worked with. What I did was to give people initial structures that were worked through in order to develop frameworks for the piece. Within those frameworks the piece was pretty much fully improvised. There were two set phrases within it but they were also improvised with, so that when the phrases were used was up to the dancers and also how they used them. How they put their material in relation to other people's material was a choice of the moment. They choreographed it on the spot. So, I gave them the frameworks, the initial things that they worked with, the creative frameworks.

And what were those initial things? Well, the initial idea came out of a workshop that I taught in 1993.

I continued exploring some of the thoughts and processes that arose in that workshop with a group of students. We got together one evening a week for about half a year. That whole process led into the piece that I just made.

I do 'hands on'² work with people a lot and I had this wild crazy idea that I would like to see where the movement would go if many hands were on one body. The many hands would give whatever information they gave and kind of catapult this person into moving. So what we did in the initial workshop was that one person was 'it' and then all the other people put their hands on this person.

through allowing the flow of energy to carry the body while toned muscles work efficiently.

They all stress the importance of being present, fully in this moment, aware, so that one can have the greatest freedom of choice.

Ultimately, this is improvisation.

In all of this work, responsibility for change lies within each individual.

The T'ai Chi Chuan is a martial art and movement meditation. Deep concentration, the development of internal strength and energy, the circulation of this energy along clear pathways within the body, the allowing of movement to be carried by the flow of energy, the union of opposites (eg. weight and lightness, deepening inward and expanding outward) are all aspects of the T'ai Chi Chuan that carry into my dancing and teaching. Gerda Geddes, my teacher, teaches the T'ai Chi as the physical manifestation of a symbolic, allegorical journey through life, from birth to death – image supporting movement.

I define the anatomical release work as a way of experiencing anatomy through images, sensation and movement, so that anatomical information can become living and vital, and a deep physical understanding becomes possible. One approaches skeletal re-alignment and re-education of muscle patterning through the nervous system, through imagining changes within the body along very specific lines of action, while body and mind are in a quiet, receptive state (ideokinesiology). One is freed from unnecessary restrictions through release

We worked a lot with questions of how you put hands on, things to be aware of in that act and how you listen to what's going on. There were a lot of questions about what is it that we're doing when we put hands on someone. So everyone put their hands on this one person and the framework that I gave, or the game that we played, was there would be a period of time – I think we started out with maybe ten minutes – with everyone's hands on the person, and then they would move for ten minutes. When they finished moving, they would receive verbal feedback from the others about what they, the watchers, had seen in the moving. That would last about another ten minutes. Then they would do a five minute finishing solo in response to the moving they had done and the information that they had heard. But then the time shifted a bit and finally we didn't time it at all. People started moving when they felt they were ready and I think the moving lengthened to be about fifteen or twenty minutes because it seemed like people needed to work into some stuff.

It was really interesting and people got a lot of experience in learning how to watch, not just in learning how to do, how to move. We did a bunch of other things too but that was the core idea that I wanted to play around with more. So for this piece, we continued to explore the 'hands on' process. A lot of the sourcing of the material came from 'hands on'.

Did you direct the 'hands on'? In the workshop here last week you directed the 'hands on' process in quite precise ways; there were specific things that you were asking us to focus on. This process was not like that? No, it was totally different. One of the other things that began to happen once we started working within a group where a sense of trust could be really felt by each individual was that they felt that they could begin to open and let go all layers of experience, not just physical. A lot of emotional stuff started coming up and it was really interesting for me to help people channel it back into moving and to see what kind of moving came out of the emotional material, the emotional charge. So what we were working with in the initial workshop was actually looking at the emotional places, looking at where having all this energy, or all this focus into one person's body would take them and where they then could take their moving.

The workshop was called Complex Movement; it wasn't an Awareness workshop (like the workshop I conducted here). Often at

of tension, letting muscles return to a toned resting length as the body balances easily around the central vertical axis. This allows for the greatest range of movement. Integration within the body leads to a flexible relationship of parts. Balanced alignment is found through imagery not force. The natural progression from this experiencing of the body is into improvisation that rises from a deep, internal place.

The Alexander Technique is a body-mind re-education tool. Through gentle touch, verbal feedback and the thinking of directions within the body, awareness of one's kinaesthetic sense is re-awakened and refined. One can recognise and relinquish habitual movement patterns that interfere with and restrict freedom of movement. Release of habitual tension into easy energy flow allows the re-discovery of a dynamic balance within the body/mind. One can move with natural ease, flexibility and integration. One underlying premise of the Alexander Technique, 'the close connection between habit and an associated manner of use', is so essential, that it can work with any activity, allowing that activity to be executed in a more efficient way.

Beginning class sitting around in a circle, talking. So much to talk about. In the beginning, so many questions. Often they're questions that can't even, as yet, be formulated – the students don't yet know the words – it's useful to hear others ask and tell. Concepts like, learning through unlearning, allowing, non-doing, doing less, waiting, receptivity, softness

the school a Complex Movement Workshop is one where people generate material which they then remember and then the material is played around with. What I wanted to do was not that process of playing with set material but to have people find the complexity within their own moving, within their improvising. What was really beautiful was that people's moving *was* so complex. Even the simplest thing, when you really work it deep into the body and have it come from a very deep source becomes highly complex. And it is very mesmerising to people watching it, especially when you begin to learn how to see it, how to look for all the detail in it. So that was all very interesting to me. What we did was just put hands on and the idea that we started out with, the focus, was to be attentive to the moment and to try to give the person whatever you felt that they needed at that moment. You would look at the person (they would be lying down), and you'd look at the body and you'd think, well, what they need is a little bit more energy here, or a little bit of touch here and each person would go to a different place . You were doing this simultaneously, with everyone's hands on one person, or were you working in partners? Mostly there were a lot of hands on one person at the one time, up to ten pairs, but sometimes a person would choose to watch as opposed to putting their hands on. That sounds highly complex. If your concern was to develop complex movement it seems as if you found an ideal training process where people would become familiar, if not comfortable (probably never comfortable), with a degree of complexity, just in terms of sensory experience. In the 'hands on' there must have been an enormous amount of information and exchange going on. Yes, there was a lot of information for each person but what was incredibly beautiful about it was that each person really took that information. This was a higher year workshop and all of the people who were working with me at that point had already worked with me quite a bit so there was a shared understanding already of places that could be touched on. And then we got even more interesting with things so it wasn't necessarily hands but other parts of your body you could touch with. Or you wouldn't touch the person but you'd touch the person who was touching the person. We found all kinds of variations. We played different games with it once we took the process out of the workshop. We explored

and strength can at first be filled with confusions, hesitancy and anger as well as with trust, recognition, relief and fully abandoned motivation towards movement. This talking feels essential, good.

This is a time where I will introduce the part of the body we will focus on – head, shoulder blade, heart, hip-socket, psoas, pineal – bone, organ, joint, muscle, gland – making connections in any way that feels right, within systems, between systems – floating skull plates, shoulder blades and pelvic wings opening in flight, heart rocked in hammock of thoracic spine curve, the ‘back and up’ of psoas and sterno-cleido-mastoid, joint spaciousness, glands as energy centres.....we look at many pictures and a 3-dimensional skeleton. We talk, bringing up any information that anyone has relating to this body part. People love getting scientific, esoteric, specific, diffuse, universal, personal – the images surrounding the area expand.

Having looked at pictures, having spoken, with appetites whetted, we then dig in.

My dance students put hands on each other from the beginning, touching, exploring, feeling for bone, muscle, the shape of things – sensory information. They learn quickly. From not knowing what is being looked for, they soon become sensitive, to recognising tension that is asking for dispersion, direction both in their partner and in themselves, energy flow, warmth, and perhaps most important, to their partner’s needs, and the giving of space to let

things like the person who is being touched lying on top of another person’s body. So they’re getting information from people touching them and from this body that’s underneath and they are also passing information in both directions. Sometimes only the top person moved; sometimes both people moved. We also played another game where it was the people who were touching, who had had the hands on, who moved, and the person who had been touched would watch. There were all kinds of variations on that theme.

All of that workshop information went into the performance project. Three of the people I chose for the project had taken that workshop and so had knowledge already about the process and three hadn’t. But all of them had done a lot of work with me.

One of the things I realised after I started working with the piece was that it also had to do with transformations and translations. One thing would transform into another. The initial way we began to source material for the piece happened with all hands on one person who transformed their sensory experience into moving, into a solo. Having watched this, everyone else did a movement solo in response to this first solo, that is, the initial solo statement was translated into other bodies. The first person then returned these by doing another solo, feeding back, through her body, the feedback she had received. We then went off and wrote, so that all that moving experience was translated into writing. We went through this process with each person, watching and tasting our own and everyone else’s experience. The writing then became the source for the known movement material. Words were picked out and they were translated back into movement again. Each person’s movement phrase had moments drawn out of it which became part of a common movement phrase. So, there were layers and layers within layers. It’s now a much more common practice for choreographers and dancers to involve themselves with imaging and ideokinesis, both as part of training and in the development of work for performance but it’s another thing altogether to develop a whole work using ‘hands on’ as the primary source, using touch in that way. To have a sense of your body, for it to be defined through touch and for movement to be evoked through the touch of another and for that to be the starting place for the creation of performance is very unusual, I would think. It’s a new thing.

Well, for me it makes the

that need surface. My Alexander hands-on knowledge allows me to impart to students a subtle energetic quality of touch, and the concept of non-doing, the kind of touch where thinking translates through the hands into one's partner. Putting hands on each other gives students important information in both directions. It is also a confirmation that the image is being experienced.

The Alexander directions are a constant, underlying all information, sensory and verbal, that I give students. Whole head moving delicately; torso lengthening, widening and deepening; elbows and knees away; fingers and toes lengthening – the expansion of inner space, a source and resource for movement. I ask students to look with microscope eyes – seeing parts in great detail, then, with new clarity, turn the telescope around – to see the whole falling together in unexpected ways. Having 'seen' and experienced a part differently, we can see ourselves, also, from a new and different perspective – one that allows for a letting go, that allows for greater ease, that opens new possibilities, new doorways into the unknown. "If it feels strange, let it be strange", Bill Williams, my first Alexander teacher used to say. Most of the time it feels so deliciously and unmistakably right, but sometimes it's shaky, or terrifying, or just plain odd.

As we integrate the part back into the whole, we are giving the Alexander directions greater detail, giving 3-dimensionality, depth, to the Alexander length and width.

images, whatever it is you are working on, very real, very tangible. It takes it out of just being in the mind to really putting it into the body. I feel that I was really lucky that at the beginning when I first connected with the release work I also connected with the Alexander work so it was a parallel experience for me. The information that I got through the 'hands on' work, through being touched, was so powerful. I also studied alignment with Andre Bernard who did all the tactile aid work.

The Alexander work had a different dimensionality to it and of course I don't only have the Alexander work; there's a lot of other 'hands on' techniques that I've explored. There's a three-dimensionality to the experience of touching and being touched that I want to give to people who work with me.

What was so amazing for me was that all of this imaging work could be made even more pertinent by adding that element of touch into the experience; the image could be made to be even more three-dimensional, moving and real. People can make assumptions in their mind about what they're doing when they're alone, but if you have your hands on and your hands are trained enough to help guide them into the experience that you're looking for, then they can't kid themselves that something is happening when it isn't. It's a reality check.

I started incorporating that in my teaching at a certain point and found that it was incredibly powerful. That was also when I started extending the length of my classes to be at least three hours long because I wanted to give people the experience of 'hands on'; they could have time to experience that and then they could take their experiencing into moving.

And what is happening when someone has their hands on a person? Would you describe it as 'reading' another's body, or as a sensing of what is going on there, or directing? And there is information going the other way too isn't there? You are in relationship?

Within class or within the performance project? Could you talk about the distinction between those two contexts?

Well in class when I teach awareness work I think the information is very clear, very specific and it's about anatomical experience, experiencing your anatomy, your physicality, in the deepest and most productive ways you can possibly experience it at this moment. Once you know that, know those places, or glimpse them, through being touched and through being taken or expanded into another

Moving on to simply walking, then running – sensing the touch of foot on floor, spreading toes, weight passing downward through the bones – the bony framework; organ content – weight within the body; lengthening, sleek muscles – an animal-like muscularity. I will introduce game structures that get students heated and excited, blood flowing through veins, feeling their own and others' weight, (body weight to balance the Alexander lightness), exploring balance, bodies moving, sweating, breathing fast, breath supporting movement, energy streaming, a sense of play, forgetting to be careful. Simply enjoying moving. Getting tired. Too tired to hold on. Welcoming rest.

All of this information is carried into improvisation via a time of stillness where each individual can drop deep within themselves, where imagery and the previously perceived sensory information expands understanding and experience. I let my students go to deep places, where conscious control is out of the way, no matter how constructive it may be. In these places of deepened experience, awareness is heightened- to be able to recognise habit, to be able to recognise what has replaced it, to be able to recognise an open doorway.

"Sensation is the image," a dancer friend, Lisa Nelson, says. I trust our sensing ability – the innate knowledge of the body to integrate if given an opening. A deeply knowing body, centred and internally quiet, can release into easy, efficient alignment and movement. Moving then rises from a deep, inner motivation and understanding. ○

physical/mental state through touch, you can go for that experience for yourself. The information that I bring in to an awareness class is very specific and is usually body oriented. But in this other process, it became much more to do with where you, the person being touched, are as you, as yourself, on many different levels.

You are in situation where you're constantly changing ...

Yes, you're constantly changing. You're taking the information from your partner or the other people's touch into any level of experience. It's based in the body, so there's a physicality to it, but a lot of other parts of yourself are being explored. So it doesn't have a particular direction to it. When I work with a person in class what I'm looking for is to help them expand into their bodies and into their moving more. In this other work, it may be that someone will go into their contractions or their screwing up of themselves, their ugly unproductive stuff, whatever that is; it doesn't really matter. In this context the 'hands on' process becomes more a creative tool rather than a way to fine tune your instrument, which is your body, which is the focus of the class situation.

Another thing that strikes me as you talk about the emotion that can arise in the 'hands on' work is that that emotional response is related to the simple fact of being in physical contact with someone and to being touched with care and attention. However minimally it might be defined, there is relationship and connection in that moment. Images can be powerful triggers for emotion in themselves but when you add that element of touch the experience is deepened. That physical contact between people, that connection, is a form of energy and there can be a profound exchange there, which is enabling, which can support a person in their process of exploration and change.

As I was watching class this morning I was thinking how extraordinary this practice is. The attention, care and love that is apparent in the partner work is quite remarkable and yet we have become used to it; it's a normal practice, part of a whole approach to working with the body. But it seems to me that although the partner relationship in alignment work is often defined in somewhat impersonal, pragmatic terms it's actually much richer than that, much more ambiguous and risky; it both means and doesn't mean what it might in another social context. I've meandered around this issue but there are two things which I wonder if you could talk about further – the emotion that arises in the work and the fact that

you direct people to put it back into moving. Well, that's my focus and my particular place in it is to move, to move the information, whatever information comes up. Whether it's through imaging or whether it's through doing any of this touching business, any time you have release in the body you're going to bring out stuff. Actually in my beginning experiences with the release work I didn't know that, I didn't have the people to tell me that this would affect me on many different levels. I think that for me now it's really important to pass that information on to the people I work with; that this is not just about your body, it's about everything. Because as soon as your body starts to open up you will start to open up the stuff that's locked in there, all the joys and sorrows and whatever else.

Often at school we do have the students going through very hard times because somehow the work is affecting them, on many different levels, one of them being psychological and if they get into a certain place then we always encourage them to go to seek therapy, to seek help from professionals who are dealing with this. But I do think it's exciting and I think without looking into that stuff you are a lesser artist.

A lot of people say to me, well I don't know where to draw the line: Is this therapy or is this about making work? To me that's never been an issue. I'm exploring myself and whatever I find there I'll put into my work and whatever I discover in my work I'll put into my self, my life. It sort of feeds itself and I've never been able to separate them out; it's just been one process along a continuum. Yes, but I guess that's scary for some people, depending on what's happening, whether it's pleasurable or not.

Yes, I think it is and also I think sometimes people get rather introverted and that's where my interest in moving is. I always keep encouraging them to put it into movement, to put it out. It's not about sitting in a corner and crying; although that may be part of it, that's not the end of it. You want to take it further and to see where it can go in a way that is able to be translated into performance if that is the direction that you are going in. Not that everyone has to take it in that direction.

I imagine that is the direction at the school.

Well, that's the push, I think.

But it doesn't always play out that way does it? No, it doesn't and to me it doesn't really matter because as long as I help someone find their power, their personal power, it's

not up to me to say you have to put it into performance. If they want to put it somewhere else, that's their choice. It's of course more satisfying if someone then begins to use it as a tool for creating, whatever that might be. Some people start doing great drawings, some people start to put it into teaching or writing or whatever.

How do you conceive of the relationship between class and workshop practice and performance?

Well one of the things that my friend Dominic told me that his mother, who was an actress and now teaches acting, used to say, is that a class is a class; your work within a class is one thing. Rehearsal is rehearsal, so your work within a rehearsal is something different to your work in the classroom and a performance is something else. So when you're performing you're not doing a class and you're not rehearsing. I thought that was useful because although in some ways I do feel that there is a continuum between studio practice and performance, it is different. Even within more open ended structures of performance you are still defining material, in whatever way, you're defining it, and you're asking someone to watch.

I don't like people watching my classes because I feel that puts class participants off; it frames them in a different way. Also I don't like people watching very early rehearsals either because I like people to have the freedom to explore into areas that we may not feel that comfortable with if people are watching. There's a point when a rehearsal can be watched. If the person is familiar and has a certain way of watching then maybe watching a class is even okay.

What happens through the process of rehearsal so that it does become possible to be watched without contracting, without retreating? What has transpired between the early rehearsal where it's not okay to have someone watching and a later stage when it is?

Well I think I begin to define the area that I'm working in, even if it's an open improvisation where I don't know what's going to happen, within a performance I'm still saying this particular exploration is okay for someone to watch; it's okay that they watch me going through this testing out of the water.

Is it just a question of you being in that territory a little longer so that you are a little detached from it, or just that it's stronger, more familiar? Well, if I'm very specifically making a piece then I think that it is

at the point when my framework for what the piece is about is clearer. Even if the piece will keep changing in performance which a lot of my pieces do tend to do, you know. I've clarified a framework and so I'm willing and wanting people to watch what it is that I'm defining or what I'm wanting to say within that. And actually the performance often clarifies things for me and I begin to see more layers that exist within a piece than I realised during the process of making it. I think that's pretty standard, that performance clarifies further.

So I use it, I use the performance to get to know what it is that I'm working with better. Even if it's just an open improv and it has no other definition than just that, I'm exploring territory within myself and seeing how far I can allow myself to go with whatever it is, whether it's space, music or light, that's the territory that's being explored at that particular time. But I think that within a rehearsal I'm in a more vulnerable place; not that I ever stop being in a vulnerable place because when one works with improvisation, then I think you're always in a vulnerable place when you put yourself into a performance situation.

In class I'm very specifically working for myself; I'm really doing it to get to know myself better. In the early rehearsal period I'm still exploring and defining territory for myself and later in rehearsal I'm starting to think about the audience, I'm beginning to think about another watcher other than just myself or whoever I'm working with. Then in performance you're putting it out. One of the issues that we were working with in the piece, for instance, was the issue of conviction. Once you're in performance and once you're putting the material in front of an audience, however small or however large that audience is, you can't stop to wonder whether what you're doing is the right thing for that moment or whether it's going to work or not. You have to have all of the information so deeply known within you that you go out there and you do it without any hesitation and you have to put yourself out there on the line. One of the things that we came to through the piece was that people talked about wanting to be generous to other people and giving them space so that they're not always out in the performing space. And then we were talking about how it's not necessarily generous to not put yourself out there; that there's a generosity in going out and providing the material that someone else can feed off, that will

draw someone else into the space.

In performing, whether it is your own performing or when you're directing other people, what are the main things that you're looking for? What are the values, the qualities, that are most important for you in a performer? There might be many.

I think one of them is a deeply sensed, intelligent physicality and a lot of my pieces are primarily vehicles for dancing, to be moving. I love to dance, I love to move and I get very high from moving and from watching people moving. I find it really exciting to watch sports, not for the competitive aspect but for the experience of watching people moving, and watching animals moving or babies or whatever it is; moving has always excited me. To see someone with really deep and intelligent physicality is very important to me whether I'm watching dance or anything else in movement. I think it intensifies the experience. And then because I'm a dancer, it's important to me to be able to convey to whoever is watching what I'm thinking, feeling, experiencing through moving, so that I'm looking for a certain kind of eloquence or articulateness in my moving. And I'm looking for intelligence; that there be a mindfulness or a consciousness or an awareness of the moving self and of what it's trying to convey. Related to that I'm very interested in being in the moment and I think that a very deep interest in that has led me towards more and more improvisational work. I've done a lot of work that is set, known material, but since leaving Trisha (Brown) I've been playing around more and more with improvisation and that's I guess the ultimate 'being in the moment'. Even in the 1970s in Dance Exchange I was interested in improvisation but it's become clearer and clearer and more and more powerful the longer I've worked.

I was very interested to hear about the work that you're developing with others and in describing it you have been talking about *allowing* the moving, not about constructing or making movement material. It seems to me that your process entails a very different relationship to oneself, a different organisation of self, as compared with the process of making work through the conscious direction and choreographing of material.

Yes, it's a different process. It seems to me that I've always made work from a very intuitive base and for quite a while I didn't trust that as being valid. It took me a while to learn that that's a very valid way of working, that it's one way. It's as valuable as

the other and can be even more immediate. One of the reasons why I loved working with Trisha so much was that she was so intellectually clear but she had such a deep understanding of her body and worked with her intuitive sense and somehow the two came together in such a rich way. It was a very important experience for me to work with her. In your own practice you are also bringing together two very powerful modalities, two kinds of knowledge. You have spoken of intuition but you are also involved in a rigorous inquiry, a practice of the mind, as you do this very detailed, deep research upon your own body and the body of others. One of the frameworks for that study is the Alexander technique, but I know you draw upon other frameworks too. I think that one of the things that I give people through my work is that they can let go of head intellectualism and let their bodies' intelligence start to reassert itself and to learn to trust that, which is very exciting for a lot of people and very freeing, very opening, as it was for me. I feel that I was very lucky in the way my work proceeded in that I was constantly engaged in performing; I was never out of it. Any learning, anything that I understood through whatever class or workshop, I was immediately putting it into performance. Even when I was doing the Alexander training to become a teacher I was working with Trisha and we were in the process of making a piece. So there were never the questions for me like there are with a lot of people, whether it was the people learning how to teach the Alexander technique who then said, how am I going to go out into the world, out of the school, to start teaching? Or whether it's the people who are students at the school who ask, how am I going to go out into the world and really become a performer? I never had those questions because I was always there, which was an interesting way to be learning this stuff. Interesting, but also challenging I imagine because you're having to maintain some kind of professional practice out there at the same time as you're processing all this other information. Oh yes. There are situations where you're totally thrown out because you've changed, you've become a little different and how can that continue to support what you've done before. It does, but the doing and the results will be different.

If we recognise that disciplines, practices and techniques produce particular kinds of bodies or body-subjects, what body is produced through these practices of alignment, Alexander and hands on? How would you describe it? How is the 'new dance' aesthetic manifested in bodily, kinetic terms? That's an interesting question because as I come here to Australia and I watch people moving I realise there's a commonality in the way I'm thinking and moving and the way a number of people here are moving. There are similar sources that we're working out of and I think it does relate to a particular aesthetic. But at the same time and especially working within a school where a lot of different people turn over, I feel that one of the things that I hope to do is to give people a deeper understanding of their bodies and a way of working with themselves; and they can use that within whatever aesthetic they choose to take it into. With a lot of the people at the school, there is a similarity, there's a certain kind of freedom to their moving, a certain ease; there's a certain allowing of things to happen and a looseness, a loose jointedness. But within that, people do many, many different kinds of work and I hope to encourage that. I don't want people to look like me. I don't think there is one particular way of moving but, having worked with Trisha, having worked within a certain strata of dance society I do see that there are familiar attributes and values, certain qualities. There is a particular use of flow; there is a particular use of weight even when this is disrupted or disjointed. I think that when you do have a certain way of moving you are open to criticism. We get criticisms about the school, that the students move a certain way and I think they do. I think that we're working within a certain field, and actually without that I think it would not have the clarity or the strength that it can have. But a lot of different work can be related and you know, people whose moving I really value can range from someone as kind of, I don't know, bashy and clunky as Ishmael Houston-Jones or as wild and, throwing themselves around as Jennifer Monson or Trisha's extraordinary subtlety and articulateness. Those people you named, Ishmael and Jennifer, they're people who are improvisors, engaged in moving in a full bodied, fully present way? Is that what you are looking for in your teaching? Yes, well that's a particular interest of mine but then, like I said, if some-

one wants to take it into writing or painting or something else, that's fine. I don't have a need to see a particular outcome of what I teach, although there is that full bodiedness, that depth of moving that interests me and I hope that whoever is taking part in my classes will get to experience that to some degree or other.

Having worked within this particular way for probably close to twenty years now, sometimes I wonder how I'm ageing. I see things going out of fashion or I see new ideas filtering in and I try to keep myself open to new things but it is still within the framework of what I've set out to explore in this particular life. I wonder sometimes at its relevance for younger people, although oftentimes when younger dancers come in contact with what I'm doing, they discover a lot of themselves and a lot about their moving, and it seems to end up being very valuable in whatever direction they then choose to take their work. But these are questions that I keep asking myself and I think one has to if one's not going to get stale, or become an institution.

Personally I think I keep myself open to change by finding new toys, new things that interest me. At first I worked very skeletally and then I got more into organs. These things overlapped also. Now my interest is very much in terms of working with meridians and energy. Energy has always interested me. I was talking earlier about meeting up with the release work and the Alexander work pretty much together but even before that I had gotten very interested in T'ai Chi and that's also about the flow of energy and a particular way of thinking about the body.

As you mention T'ai Chi, I'm reminded of something that came up in class the other day. We were working on the three body masses of pelvis, ribs and head and you were demonstrating the partner work we were about to do. The activity involved rocking, working in partners and rocking. You had your hands on a person who was lying down and you were gently rocking her. Your instruction, directed, I think, to both partners, was to "let yourself get lost in rocking". Then you added that if you sense that there's resistance to the rocking or if your partner is too wilful then find a way of bringing them back to a state of receptivity. It seemed to me that you were talking about a state of desirelessness both on the part of the person being rocked and the person assisting the rocking, shall we say. In that action there wasn't a will to change or a desire to change, it was empty in a way. You were not

trying to teach them something through your hand neither were they wanting to learn something or alter something. I found that very intriguing. If we're stepping away from notions of desire or agency, from a hunger to move, where does the moving come from? And if you're thinking about making work for performance, how does that happen?

Well, you know, I'm hoping to address that by things like the class that we did today, for instance, where we were talking about beginning, you know, the beginning is the place to start from. I can think of finding a beginning as being the hardest thing in the world or I can just say, well, any moment is the beginning. This is one of the things that I think having a child taught me at close hand; being able to watch that incredible curiosity of children where they will be totally engaged in one thing and then suddenly they're totally engaged in the next thing and it happens seamlessly and with such totality. That's very interesting to me. So, I can begin here and I can begin here and each is valid and if I really get engrossed in it then I can move anywhere I want out of that.

Perhaps I'm being rather rigid in how I'm thinking about choreographing because I think that desire, or wanting to make something or to see something happen are necessarily part of the process; issues of agency and choice and will are involved. If I was to take the example of that rocking activity as a kind of model of choreographic practice, an alternative paradigm if you like, it's very challenging to my notions of how things happen. But I do recognise that we all have experiences where something happens or we are drawn somewhere and we don't experience it as a moment of will. There's a certain will in it because there is a desire somewhere. Just being conscious of the fact that it can happen is, you know, already putting it into your mind. In the new science they're talking about how just the act of looking will change something, so the act of just being aware will already create change.

I was talking earlier about feeling that I'm a very intuitive dancer-choreographer and one of the problems I used to have was feeling that I didn't work hard enough to make my pieces and, you know, in a way I still don't. One of the things that happened within this piece, for instance was that we started out working with some ideas and we began to create these frameworks and then at a certain point I said to them, okay, now we've got the material that we're going to work with and they all went, Oh

really! But we looked and we realised that we had all this material and in a way it was no effort; you can either get it through effort or you can get it through less effort. Both are valid and I just happen to be interested in the less effortful way or have my talents resting in there, lying in there.

Well again that's interesting because when you were working with that person in the rocking, you weren't talking about passivity.

No, no, it's not about being passive.

It's a very active state and it seems to be really important to make that distinction. Yes, and I think that that's one of the big issues that I'm working with in the work that I personally do and it's the work that I'm most interested in. This availability of self, this generosity, this willingness.

There's an aesthetic issue here too. In the workshops you create a sense of real abundance, a kind of an aesthetic of abundance. Dancing in your terms is not about limitation. You speak of making space and in that space there's tons of movements. So there is a rhetoric of abundance functioning there as a powerful strategy in your teaching.

Possibilities, yes. Let me just continue with that thought. You are talking about a rhetoric of abundance or a state of an abundance where you open the space and so many possibilities open up. Now one of the ways that I feel I specify or that I limit the endless possibilities is by coming back to the body and clarifying and specifying what that is.

What the body is as a structure? What that is? Yes, as a physical structure. That's the instrument that I'm working with so I get very, very specific and very finitely so. I can go into the greatest detail and the most minuscule kind of particle and that focus brings me back to some kind of reality of material form. Then out of that, this incredible expansion, that has room for all kinds of things, can begin to take place.

Yes, well that's very interesting even in terms of the kind of speech that you're involved in as you're talking through a class. You play between very concrete things – your weight, the floor, your bones and muscles – and these other conceptual and aesthetic concerns whether they be exploring a whole series of beginnings or expanding this way or that way, going further.

Yes, specific and non-specific; they balance each other out. It's not just flailing around in endless space and it's not limited by getting too intellectual or stuck with one thing. One's constantly shifting through and within and around.

I am curious about the

whole manner in which you talk us through the workshop. For this certain period of time you take us through a series of experiences and images pretty much through speech. You create a sound envelope, that would be one way of expressing it. But how do you conceive of it?

Your voice is doing all kinds of different things, sometimes it's instructional and sometimes it seems to be reading us, our bodies and our moving and giving feedback, telling us what you see; at other times you stimulate action, add dynamic. I am reminded of Bill Williams' Alexander classes, of how he talks constantly, how he keeps up a constant, steady stream of words, how he envelops you in this discourse of your body. It repeats and it changes. It's a very powerful technique.

And he's constantly asking you to think, to engage your mind within the activity of your body.

So is it something about ... I was going to say *density* of language, but actually I don't experience it as dense so much as constant, as continuous. Is it the constancy of the language that is important do you think?

Yes, I do. Often my students say to me "I wish that your voice was there with me when I go into a studio alone". It's just easier to have someone from outside feeding in information because you're not having to come up with it yourself, but ultimately what I hope to teach people is that they can go into a studio and that kind of process can begin to happen for themselves. And it would lead them in different directions to where I would lead them. One of the exercises that I sometimes do with people is to have them standing in a circle with one person walking around the circle. When they pass, each person touches them wherever they are drawn to touch and so draws their attention to that place. As they move around they keep getting touched in different places so their attention is constantly shifting through their body. My words are like that; they're constant touches that keep shifting your attention into new places so you're constantly engaged, you're constantly being stimulated. It's important not to overstimulate but not to under-stimulate either.

When someone is in the studio alone the other voice that can come up is the voice of judgement and that's eliminated in this situation. That's totally eliminated. There's literally no space for it and new ideas keep coming in so one's constantly asked to or challenged to try this, try that; if that didn't work go here. That's also, I think, to do with the articulateness that I'm looking for.



KARCZAG

So there is a quite literal relation between your verbal articulation and a kind of articulateness in the body; or at least, there's an analogy there.

Yes. I'm asking students, and myself, to be infinitely aware, in many different directions, all over, constantly.

— August 1994. Melbourne

1 European Dance Development Centre, Arnhem, the Netherlands .

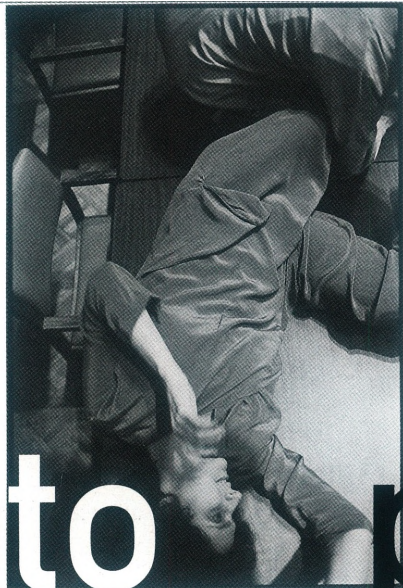
2 Eva has noted that although she is an Alexander teacher (and this is where the term 'hands on' arises), the touch which was the pivot point of the workshop was not an Alexander kind of touch. She writes: "Rather than being 'directed' (ie the toucher knowing what the optimal direction for moving is for the one being touched - head forward and up, back lengthening and widening, knees away), this touch was more about opening space and providing energy for the one being touched to use in whatever way was immediately relevant..."

5

Coming



Photographs by Paula Court



into parts

by MARIANNE GOLDBERG

STAGE DIRECTIONS

MARIANNE To move according to her body's desire, with Eva's direction and assistance in finding that desire.

EVA To read the signs of Marianne's body and the signs of her own physical desire in relation to the openness in Marianne's body. To support and be supported.

ANNA To speak fragments of a previously recorded session between Eva and Marianne and to transform that conversation into the terms of her own subjectivity while watching their duet. To pose questions about what she perceives while spectating.

REBECCA To interview Eva and Marianne, and perhaps Anna, Elin, Ann and the audience as well. To raise theoretical issues. Equally importantly, to communicate her sensual response to the performance via her questions.

ELIN To respond. To verbalise her own interior monologue while spectating. To speak in declarative sentences only.

ANN To moderate. To orient the other spectators as to what is happening. To keep order amidst the panellists, to tell us when it is time to move from one section to another, to open questions to the floor if she feels it appropriate.

Performances can be instants of intervention in which something unknown can happen, in which women can come into being and into interaction in tender and courageous ways. This can happen through simple acts of breathing or of sensing mobility inside the body. I give these acts time and space on-stage. When I composed **COMING INTO PARTS**, I had hopes that together with an audience I might initiate an open-ended performance text that could spawn new meanings for the female body. I had been invited to perform as part of an event called “Reading the Signs” at a conference on women and theatre in New York and I asked Eva Karczag, my Alexander technique teacher, to perform a duet with me. We would improvise on top of tables behind which the academic panellists spoke. I wanted to suggest that there is possible a greater flow between body and word, between kinetic perceptions and cultural analysis.

In studies with Eva Karczag and others over the years, I have been developing a greater capacity to listen to my body’s needs and intelligence. As we moved together on top of the panel tables, Eva and I supported one another physically and verbally, allowing incremental changes to occur within our bodies at each changing instant. The quiet tones of our voices, as well as the sounds of our breath, were projected out to the audience via microphones. As in our private Alexander sessions, I remained intently aware of the mobility I sensed in various parts of my body. Eva, through touch and verbal encouragement, helped me to open rather than constrict those parts, expanding the space inside my bones, joints, and organs.

One

of the images that emerged from our work was of my body splitting into independent parts – my thigh stretching out from my pelvis, separating in pleasurable expansion. Yet, as I approached this expansion, I confronted distorted body images in which my legs felt impossibly small in relation to my torso. I had to fight off intensely disturbing images in order to wedge a space for another perception- that of my torso free to choose between going its own way or joining in motion with my legs. This potential for separation was not about coming apart but about coming into parts – the unsuturing of the body.

In feminist film theory suturing is that process through which one shot becomes “glued” to the next in the audience’s eyes: a sequence of shots assures that a consistent set of narrative and gaze systems cohere around the female body.¹ How different is

this coming into parts of the body from the training techniques of ballet or codified strains of modern dance, in which the student is asked to articulate positions in a geometrized space that is already predetermined. By creating potential openings in the way parts of the body join together, both the external gaze of the audience and the inner gaze of the performer (the way she images her own body while performing) might be freed. In Eva's evolution of the Alexander technique as well as in training in Kinetic Awareness with choreographer/filmmaker Elaine Summers, I have spent years "undoing" the impact of conventional dance training on my body – including unraveling gender profiles that often position the male as the jumper, the one who covers space, and the female as the one with flexibility and delicacy, who is manipulated by the male and displayed to the spectator.

The various forms of movement reeducation, such as the Alexander technique or Kinetic Awareness, address issues of repression and censorship at the cellular level. Constricted muscles hold traumatic memories of the socialisation process of becoming "feminine" - of learning to restrain arms from moving through space with power or to keep legs tightly closed in public. Releasing can carry with it intense physical sensations, emotional crises, or psychological and social insights. It can also give rise to flights of imagination, as the body opens with surprise to new possibilities for motion. The performer can become aware of ways in which the most primary patterns of breath or muscular contraction have been habitually patterned in identification with cultural images. Movement reeducation techniques can also allow the performer to reconnect to physiological needs that may regenerate the body.

In

COMING INTO PARTS Eva and I were not focusing on a kind of debilitating visual pleasure analysed by feminists theorists such as Laura Mulvey. We were focusing on the experiencing body, not on an objectifying gaze.² In exploring the politics of sexuality, Carol S. Vance has insisted that "feminism must put forth a politics that resists deprivation and supports pleasure."³ Eva and I were exploring an unrestrained sense of well-being in the performance of fluid, energised movement.

For the conference panel, I wanted to bring scholars and performers together to brainstorm, improvisationally, during live performance, to explore these issues. In the desire to bring theory and practice into collaboration, I

approached two conference theorists and invited them to come on-stage while Eva and I performed. I suggested they respond to what they saw by speaking into microphones set up at lecterns. To further open the boundary between spectators and performers I asked playwright/actor Anna Deavere Smith to speak from her seat in the audience. I gave her a text to read that I had transcribed from a lesson with Eva that I had recorded on audio tape. As Anna spoke it became unclear to the audience whether she had spontaneously decided to interrupt the performance or whether her speech was staged. Other conference participants took her participation as an invitation, and spoke up from all sides of the hall.

At this moment

the performance's structure was fractured more than I had expected. **COMING INTO PARTS** began to degenerate into a realm of unknown meanings- degeneration that I consider extremely fertile. Meanwhile, the theorists who I had previously invited to respond to the performance – Rebecca Schneider and Elin Diamond – entered the performance, along with Ann Gavere Kilkelly, who was to “moderate” the session. I had anticipated that the audience might begin to speak and hoped that the content of the performance itself might become the negotiation of meaning between performers and audience. Debate broke out about the right of female spectators to directly affect what happens onstage, and about the right of female performers to touch one another in healing ways.

With this negotiation of the boundaries of the performance there developed a problem of even being able to know what the performed image was. Instead of images of female bodies, what came to the foreground was a blur of communication that threatened the illusory coherence of the stage picture. Ironically, the event turned out not to fulfill the promise of “Reading the Signs” at all but, instead, to present the unreadable. The group became focused on what might be at stake in this attenuated instant of confrontation between performers and spectators, between those who were performing bodies and those who were performing theorists, and between one spontaneously formed audience cluster and another. The “meaning” of **COMING INTO PARTS** lay between all the participants in the room, and the space felt very large, the air thick, the performance stalled in a fascinating moment of not-knowing.

“...So, how are your hips feeling?

I’m thinking about width in your pelvis.... past
your knee, past your heel....

your whole torso flowing open....

that’s why I move, that’s why I write to you.....

Now very very gently roll to the side....

Keep going....organs, bones,



nerves.....”

Much of this essay originated as part of a longer piece, “Straddling Discourses,” published in *Upstaging Big Daddy: Directing Theater as if Gender and Race Matter*, edited by Ellen Donkin and Susan Clement (University of Michigan Press: Ann Arbor, 1993), 177-192.

In the photograph on p.52 the people are (left to right) Eva Karczag, Marianne Goldberg, Elin Diamond, Robert Tobey. The photograph on p.53 and above is of Marianne Goldberg.

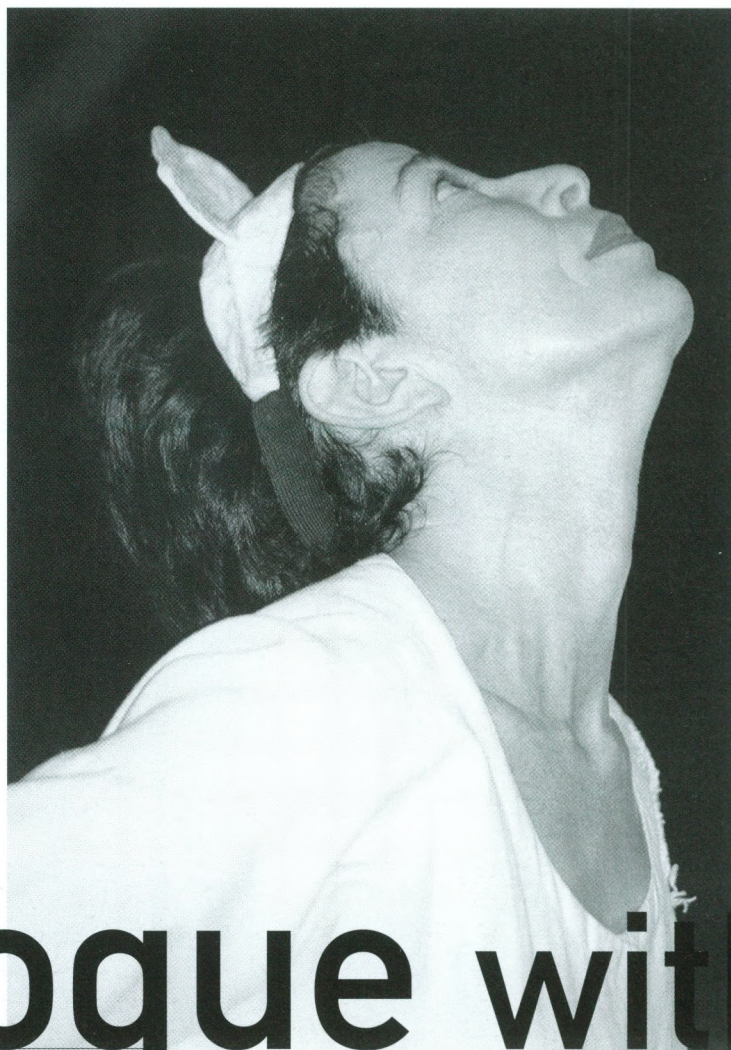
1 See Kaja Silverman’s chapter, “Suture” *The Subject of Semiotics* (New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983).

2 See Laura Mulvey, “Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema,” *Screen* 16, no.3 (Autumn 1975):6-18 and Mulvey, *Visual and Other*

Pleasures (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1989), 161-166.

3 Carol S. Vance, “Pleasure and Danger: Toward a Politics of Sexuality,” in *Pleasure and Danger: Exploring Female Sexuality*, edited by Carol S. Vance (Boston: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1984).

6



Dialogue with

"I do not know exactly when the performance meditation *living and dying* at once metamorphoses into *ah ha/nada*, perceived inseparably. When *Playing Awake 1992* begins, the physical integration of the new metaphor has so impressed itself on me that it is easily assimilated by the workshop – although there are days when all meaning is lost.

Ah ha/nada reduces language to sound and music. Thinking is not translatable. When I try to conceptualize 'ah ha', 'nada' makes the effort meaningless.

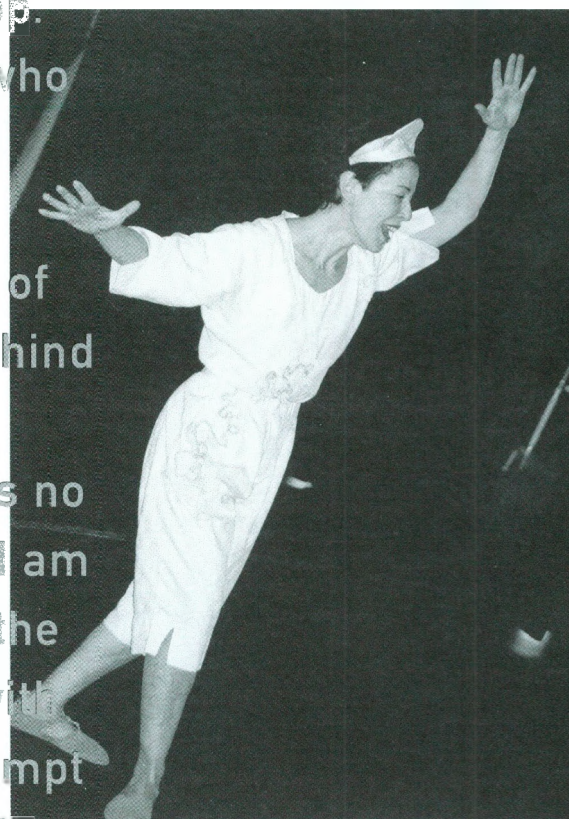
I look around the studio. The music is blaring, people are engaged everywhere, yet there is no indication that a dance workshop is in progress. At these times the core of my being becomes so untethered that laughter is the only recourse for my sanity...

Deborah Hay by JANE REFSHAUGE

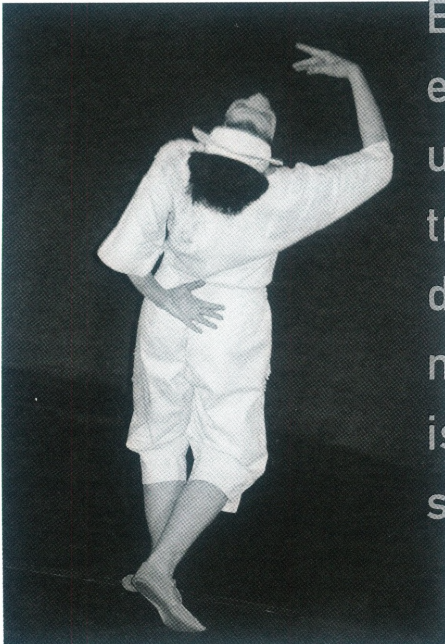
From the outside it is impossible to determine that discipline is being advanced. Theoretically, I consider this a step in the evolution of dance. Personally, it feels like my limits are exploding.

People are in groups. They are talking, screaming, acting within scenarios, teasing, playing anything and everything. A few students sleep covered with blankets used in the yoga class that precedes the workshop.

A few dancers have difficulty with those who sleep. Discipline, in their minds, requires attention, acuity, vitality; it looks like something. I choose, with the experience of twelve annual large-group workshops behind me, to democratize the tangible and intangible dynamics of discipline. There is no way discipline looks. As a matter of fact, I am as challenged by the person sleeping as the dancer dancing. The dancer lying down with a blanket over her or his body dares to tempt judgment. I am inspired and moved by this demonstration of faith in the workshop process.



All photographs
of Deborah Hay
by Emma Hanson



Either create an environment where everyone looks alike, where surface is untested, where technique is obvious, translatable, and clear; or, in the context of dance, create room for disorder, where movements cannot be learned and everyone is a special mystery. Here the observer can stretch and be served by all odds...^{ff} *

*From the Afterword
to *Lamb at the Altar:
The Story of a Dance*¹
by Deborah Hay

I n t r o d u c t i o n In August 1994, while on a study tour to the United States, I visited Deborah Hay in Texas. I was particularly interested in finding out how Deborah communicates her dance practice to the participants in her large group workshops, and how she thinks about dance education. On her part, Deborah was interested in discussing my study of Dance Movement Therapy and the comparisons I was making between it and my experience of her work. The 'Dialogue' below is excerpted from these discussions.

During this time in Austin I also attended a workshop in 'Playing Awake', the movement meditation Deborah is presently teaching and practising. In her introduction to this workshop I heard her answer the questions that I had been unable to find the words to ask in our dialogues. I decided then to tape record Deborah's teaching of her performance piece, *lamb, lamb, lamb...* which was to be restaged in New York in October, 1994. This performance/workshop was sponsored by Movement Research and was planned to coincide with the launching of Deborah's book *Lamb at the Altar: The Story of a Dance* (1994) Duke University Press. The transcript below is taken from the recordings made during rehearsals for this performance. **J a n e R e f s h a u g e**

THE WORKSHOP NEW YORK 9.10.94

DEBORAH HAY Thank you all for joining me in this adventure. It is a great opportunity for me. I've never had this experience of restaging a piece before. I am very excited about it.

How many of you have any idea about the piece that you are going to be practising? How many have some idea either from reading the movement libretto in TDR² or the book? A little bit. Well that's good. First, let me say that there are several people who have performed the piece originally. One of them is Heleri and the other is Beverly Bajema, and the other is Scott Heron. Scott and Beverly are going to be helping me – helping me get very specific. When I work in my large group workshop in Austin, which is a four month period, I am very, very permissive, and the assumption is that everybody will kick in over the period of four months – and understand at some point in the four months. And I am always willing to see that whatever you reflect back to me is what we are playing together. I imagine you are just showing me another way of playing it.

But in this context because we have such a short amount of time I have called upon Beverly and Scott to demand (laugh) that I get what I want. So they are going to help me in that capacity. This is a very unusual situation. It is not as permissive as my teaching environment normally is. It is not as permissive. I need what this piece is to be learned quickly and specifically. And so things are going to be different – for me and for you. I have no idea how this is going to work. But I am sure it will. I think I have wonderful, excellent – two excellent pairs of eyes here besides my own in Scott and Beverly. I trust their seeing very much.

The number of people in this piece is anywhere between 40 and 45. So there are many of you who aren't yet here. Let me say this. If you find at any point in this process that you are not willing to play all the way with me, and you would like to leave, please do not slip out. Please let me or Movement Research know that you are dropping out. So it is very clear.

I have no problem with that. Don't just disappear quietly, because it really will confuse things. OK? I find no reason to believe that this will not be a great adventure for all of us. If anybody asks you what you are practising here, tell them, 'lamb, lamb, lamb, lamb, lamb...' That is the name of the piece. It has a gesture. And you never say the same amount of 'lambs'. It keeps you on your toes. So it is 'Lamb, lamb, lamb...' or whatever.

The meditation. My assumption is that a number of you have some idea of the way I work. So if I am saying something that you need to clarify, please interrupt and say it. OK. For every piece that I choreograph, or every piece that I perform, there is a performance meditation. A performance meditation is an active agent on my being – on my whole being. Just like you do your own meditation sitting in front of an altar or wherever it might be. And what makes it a performance meditation is that you invite being seen meditating. You are in a relationship to the rest of the world meditating. That is all. So you are inviting being seen in this very present state of consciousness. You invite being seen. You are going to hear me say that a lot. You invite being seen. And the 'you' who is inviting being seen is over 53 trillion cells at once. So you are off the hook of, 'Well, who am I to invite being seen?' You are off the hook of that. It is 53 trillion cells in your body at once inviting being seen. Right? It is impossible. So how wonderful. You can't achieve it. You cannot achieve 53 trillion cells at once inviting being seen. So you don't have to worry about achieving it, either. You just play it – like a dog. You play it like a dog. You invite being seen playing this performance meditation. Are you following me? The meditation that we are doing – the performance meditation we are practising in this workshop is 53 trillion cells or more at once have the potential to perceive 'ah ha/nada'. Ah ha/nada. Ah ha/nada at once. They are inseparable. It isn't linear: ah ha then nada. It's ah ha/nada at once. Do you know what that means? (laugh) That is what we are playing. Ah ha/nada. Both at once. Every single instant, changing every single instant played by 53 trillion cells at once. That is all that we are doing here. It is impossible. And I am so grateful that it is impossible to achieve

because I can get that out of the way. And I can just devote myself to listening for it in my body, bring attention to my body. In my bones, in my flesh, in my ears, in my eyeballs. 53 trillion cells or more at once invite being seen playing ah ha/nada. That is what we are doing. That's what we are going to do for two weeks. Do you have any questions about this?

QUESTION Trillions.

Trillions.

Everything and nothing?

Everything and nothing – simultaneously.

Very paradoxical.

Yes. Well, its impossible. And you can't think it. How would you possibly think it. By the time you had the thought it would be over. The nada cancels it out. You can't go through it and hear a linear process. You just have to imagine that it is possible. Just imagine it – it's impossible. You can't think it. It doesn't, it can't exist in linear time. So in fact you really can't call upon anything but your own, sweet, beautiful, infinite imagination to play it out. And it is going to be different for everybody. The other part of it that's really so wonderful about doing it collectively is that when I look at you I will imagine that you are playing inviting being seen playing ah ha/nada. And I am also creating that – I am creating a universe that supports me entirely in playing. Whatever it is that you are doing, I will imagine that the feedback that I am getting is the reflection of ah ha/nada simultaneously. Whatever I see. No matter how odd, no matter how strange, no matter what it looks like, I will imagine that what it is that you are doing is exactly what I am – what it is you are playing is exactly what I am playing. I don't have time for anything less – here or anywhere – in my playing of dance to imagine anything less than support from the universe in which I am dancing. I don't have time. And we are such gorgeous resources for each other. ...It is very similar to baseball. Except there are no losers. It is very similar to baseball, tennis, basketball, football – you're a team.

But there are no what?

Losers. Any questions?

OK. Well, let's give it a whirl. There is no way ah ha/nada looks. OK? There is no one way it looks. So you don't have to worry about that. We'll just start playing ah ha/nada and right now there is no shape. There is no shape. There is only the meditation.

Should we verbalise ah ha/nada? To ourselves.

No, you don't have to verbalise it. You could if you wanted to. But I think the trick is – right away, don't think it, just get moving and then.. see yourself and call what you see ah ha/nada.

Can we make sounds?

You could make sounds, and I am going to provide some.

[Later Deborah asks for feedback from the group.]

I'm thinking about it all – a lot of the time.

I can feel the same thing in myself. It takes me a little bit of time to kick in – to get the body, the whole body, the teacher.... this is the teacher. This is the teacher. I am here to remind you to listen to the teacher. And the teacher is 53 trillion cells or more at once playing ah ah/nada. What a great, what a fabulous teacher – 53 trillion cells or more at once playing ah ha/nada every single second, every single moment change, change, change. I guess what I want to say is that it isn't an idea. I am not talking about an idea that you are capitalising on in order to feel creative. It is not an idea that you are using to ..pursue an idea. It is here. It is really a way to what I call playing awake. It is a way to be here. And to be here and to see the creativity, the creativity in the hereness. That's all. And how could it not be? How could it not be – your 53 trillion cells or more at once – how could that not be – how could your perception, your experience and perception, not be the creative act. That's what this is all about. Are you willing to own your perception – your ability to simply perceive 53 trillion cells or more at once going ah ha/nada, ah ha/nada as a creative act. And be willing to be visible in that place. As a matter of fact, not only willing, to invite being seen exploring that space. There is nothing you have to do to be creative. My perception is creativity. My perception at this moment is ah ha/nada – is the creative act. And it's a lot of work not to go somewhere to find it, but to be here in order to experience it, and reflect

it and let it go. In order to be here and reflect it and to let it go – at the same time – so the next moment is an open book. **Sometimes I think I'll be fine. And then I hear you speak and I feel like 'Oh no, our energy is wrong and we have to change.' That is my perception, isn't it? That is not yours. When you speak is it because you see a strange energy and you want to reinforce us?**

Usually when I speak I am reminding myself. When you hear me I am reminding myself. Actually, I feel like I was relatively quiet. [laugh] When I'm speaking – I want you to know – I have no time to judge whether or not you are playing it. None of us can play it all the time. None of us can play it all the time. I mean, none of us could ever play it, period – probably. So I have no judgment about whether or not you are playing it. That doesn't matter to me. My perception of you is that you are going to remember to play it. For me – I am getting everything I can by seeing you as playing. That is what I am seeing you play, remembering to play.

And going in and out?

Yes. We were all going in and out. I'm going in and out and I've been doing this since 1970. I'm going in and out all the time. It is a lot of work. It is a lot of work. And I guess if I stopped the tape recorder at this point it was because I just wanted to articulate for you what the work is. The work is remembering to play. The work is remembering to play. You forget how to play. This whole workshop – this whole piece – began from this realisation that we are seduced toward dying. Our consciousness is dying from the present all the time. The seduction to be elsewhere is so profound that I need all of you and all of me to remember to be here in order to reflect this creative passing moment. That is what the work is. Because the seduction to be elsewhere is so delicious.....I guess I wouldn't call it delicious.

Are you drawing a parallel with the idea of dying – the idea of being elsewhere and the idea of dying?

Yes. Dying to the present moment. We will take anything to get out of here. We'll do anything to be elsewhere. This dancing is where I practice being here. Other people can do it other ways. That's my relationship to dancing. It is my practice of playing awake. Using my whole body – using all of this to be awake and present and changing, not fixed.

Alert. Creative. Receptive. The work is remembering to play and I'm sure you all have very clear memories of just what that playing was when you were younger and younger and younger. I'm sure you can taste what playing was – when it was a matter of life and death. It was a matter of life or death, and we played it so passionately as little ones. And then we forget how to play passionately. And so this is a game like cops and robbers that we are all playing together, passionately. And then the dance that we are going to be performing together needs the passion of this practice that we are doing now to take into the limitation of choreographic form. So we need to have a taste for this energy – this kind of awake – so that we can bring it in to the limitation of the choreography, as it is very limiting. And the only way you are going to stay interested in playing the choreography is if you take the ah ha/nada into the limitation of the choreography. And you are willing to be seen in that place. **To make sure that I understand what you are saying, are we now ridding ourselves of outside controls and so on – being here in the moment?**

I would say that you are here listening to this gorgeous teacher of yours. Playing 53 trillion cells or more going ah ha/nada, ah ha/nada. Everything and nothing. Everything and nothing. Every single moment, changing every single instant. I am not saying you should forget the outdoor – what you came in with. I am saying, 'we are doing this now', and if that in fact releases you from the stuff that is pulling you from the outside, isn't that great? I mean, you know, you can really practice being here. And when you leave you can get pulled again into...what is going on. And there is no way it looks. And if you want to challenge me visually, whatever it is that you want to do, do it. If you want to challenge me physically – in other words if you want to challenge my attention, don't be nice to me in this part. I am not being nice to you necessarily. But challenge me, challenge me visually – whatever it is that you are doing, there is no way ah ha/nada looks. So, look at that. There is no way it looks. It could look like anything. OK? I'd like to play some more – so again 53 trillion cells inviting me to play ah ha/nada simultaneously. And when I see you I will imagine you are playing – you are remembering to play exactly what I am remembering.

[Later]

I would like you to give me some feedback about what your experience of seeing ah ha/nada is.

When you succeed in getting out of your head everything comes simultaneously, you are not thinking, it is just happening. It makes me feel free in a way. And you find yourself in the most absurd situations, but you are there. You find yourself in these completely incongruous situations and they make sense because they're there – you're there.

Yes. There is a wonderful quote by Albert Einstein, which is, 'Here is when we know nothing but everything works'.

Practice is where everything works and no-one knows why. Isn't that beautiful?

DIALOGUE WITH DEBORAH HAY BY JANE REFSHAUGE

JANE REFSHAUGE The discussion of the similarities and differences between your work and dance movement therapy is interesting to me. My experience of working with you is that everything that ever happens that is therapeutic or brings about change or is wonderful about dancing in dance movement therapy situations is something I feel I have already experienced within the work I've done with you in the large group workshop and certainly in *HEAVEN/below*. But the thing that isn't there is that you're not saying that is what you are intending to do, and you are not there in the role of therapist to counsel people through what might happen, what transformations might happen or the reactions that they might have.

DEBORAH HAY By calling something something, you can inadvertently slow down the process of understanding. Of real understanding – of the big understanding. It is a lot like when people say to me, 'I can't balance. I have trouble with balance'. I think by naming things in that way you can hinder the process of awareness. Of movement and body awareness. By calling things things like that you slow down the process. Rather than saying, for instance, 'Come on. Balance is a man made idea. Who is calling what balance?

Why isn't this balance. Why aren't we seeing this as a mind? Why aren't we reading this as a mind?' I think we need to give people more room to be as they are in their bodies and less feeling like they are not dancers. I guess that is what I am trying to get at. I think by having dance movement therapy we are saying that there is such a thing as dance movement. Or we are saying there's such a thing that is not dance movement. And that to me is a shame. It is a shame for the person who is looking at it that way, and it is a shame for the person who is being seen that way.

So when you say that by naming something, by calling it awkward or heavy or pulled down, you say it gets in the way. What does it get in the way of?

It gets in the way of ...manifesting our differences. Manifesting our personal experiences as they are. It gets in the way of being seen. It gets in the way of seeing. I think I am really talking about seeing almost more than anything. It's about retraining how I see in the world in a way that is useful to me. More useful to me than where I am calling bits and parts of people things.

Even making that distinction is naming something – so that, for example, I know I tend to look at people in terms of my background in Alexander Technique and Ideokinesis. I will look at where the weight is being held or where the weight is not being shifted, or where I feel they are basically creating a potential injury. Is it possible to think of that as dance? That you can celebrate that, celebrate the critical voice and have that as part of the dance?

Now are you talking about through your eyes – seeing that? Well, I'm sure you could. Why not? I mean if you weren't attached to what it was that you were seeing, you could turn it into what you wanted to. I mean, I feel that the ultimate goal of course would be to see it all. To be able to see how the ankles are turned in and the shoulders are being held and so on. You could read all that, read that all as dance or whatever it is. I feel like that is definitely part of it. It's both what you see and what you don't see.

Is it about expanding what you see to include more and more of what you don't see? Do you consciously go into a studio or into a dance class to work towards that expansion of the body and the mind?

I think that is what I have been doing since I started doing this work. And now it is getting closer to consciously doing that. I don't think I was conscious of that. But I think that that is what my work has been about – getting beyond the three dimensional body. The experience of the dance being beyond the experience of the three dimensional body.

What do you think is beyond that? Or why is that where you are heading?

Because of the much greater experience. The more I include in my dance, the bigger the experience of my dance. It is richer. It is more powerful. It is more inclusive. It is you know, more possibilities. I can probably show you on a graph how my dance increases. I mean, if I had to depend, especially as I get older on just the limitations of my physical body...

Is it possible to put into words the things that you have discovered beyond the physical body, some of the things that you have begun to see?

Well, I begin to actually, physically, feel my connection to a bigger universe. You really get to exercise your relation to something beyond the physical body. And I don't think I could have those experiences if I wasn't out and out choosing to exercise that they are there. It is about including what I see in what it is that I am practising. That is what the practice is. As far as you can see that is how big your dance can be. So if I am experiencing my wholeness right now, and I imagine that you are experiencing your wholeness at this moment, then whether or not you are doing it, that information for me just absolutely influences my own information right here. I am energised by how I perceive.

One difference between dance movement therapy and my experience of your work, is that you dance with the workshop participants when you teach. You are not outside the movement experience as a witness.

Well, the witness is not just the witness. The witness is also, and I don't mean it in harsh terms, the witness is setting themselves up as a judge, and it's for good reasons. I mean the whole work of dance therapy is to help people to recognize through movement the ways in which they hold tension or fear or anger in their bodies. I love that tension. I mean, when I'm dancing with people I'm just eating up

whatever movement shapes their lives. And eating up the shape of their lives and reading that as further vocabulary for me to play with when I dance. So that when I'm with people dancing I'm not a judge at all. I'm seeing them practising exactly what it is that I'm practising. Everybody is a resource for me. Nobody is less than anyone else in a room of people that I'm dancing with.

What is your intention when you move with other people?

My intention is to be awake, to really utilize every aspect of every moment, to enrich my present moment. My intention is to feel most alive and most vital.

Do you ever feel that judgement is a part of it? Is there ever a time where you sit back and have a sense of appraising, having a critical, a constructively critical judgement on movement?

I might go up to somebody and say, 'I want you to keep your eyes open. I think you will have an experience that you are putting on hold.' But when I'm actually dancing with people my judge is not there. I am always working with the whole body at once so I don't see bodies in parts. I don't take people apart visually. I don't read the participation of people who are working with me in that way. I'm always saying to people, 'The whole body at once'. I think that part of what I am teaching has to do very much with addressing the whole body at once as a way to be in the world, rather than breaking the body apart into different systems and ways. The whole body as a way to really have that unique experience of presence. I think the changes that happen in this work are on the level of 'aha'. They're hairline shifts and once the shift happens you can't go back to just that one understanding of the body.

Do you have a sense of progression in your work? When I worked with you in 1979 we did the *Grand Dance*, and you gave us specific images with choreography to go with them.

One of these images was "the surrender of 'I am'". There was another image which was 'bowing': there was the language of bowing, and some description of it in terms of cellular awareness, and there was a movement that went with it.

And then in *HEAVEN/below* it was a series of sixty four images, and they were very specific. And there was a shift there in that the choreography was (improvised from) the

image rather than specific movements. The choreography was the thought in the mind as expressed through the movement. And then when I saw your solo piece, *Sweet*, the choreography was the word 'sweet' and the movement was whatever came up. So your process of working had shifted: you had one image – instead of sixty four images with a movement for each image. You had one image to which you really – well, it seemed to be improvised, but it was meditated.

And then when you came to Australia and choreographed *Milk of the Cipher* there was an extension then to considering the duet – the space between. So the image was really about the space between people. So there seemed to have been a shift from an internal awareness of every cell, then having a cellular awareness and being able to practise that through an image, then having *one* image to which you could move as a meditation or an improvisation, then having all of the previous work present in relationship to someone else.

Last night it seemed that it had gone another step forward. I was just wondering if you have got that sense of a development?

I have removed the image. And what I am working with now is... I'm not quite sure where I am at this moment. I went from image to the experience of the paradox – the experience of paradox. I may have even taught it this way, I'm not sure, but to maintain two things that seemed like opposites in the mind at once creates its own field of energy. So that's what is kept alive. The movement doesn't even matter. The movement – the shape of the movement has become something I am trying to obscure almost as much. I am trying to get as obscure as I can through choreographing. So that the shape of the movement is very unimportant to me. What is important to me in terms of movement is trying to give people directions for movement that they can't do – but to give them a state of consciousness that they are practising all the time – that that is what the energy is. It's not the movement but the energy behind the movement.

And *Milk of the Cipher* was interesting because it was an image that could not be imagined.

Well *Milk of the Cipher* was a little obscure. Although it wasn't at all obscure to me. To me *Milk of the Cipher* becomes richer and richer. *Milk of the cipher* really boils down to 'the per-

formance of movement': performance being milk and movement being the cipher. I see a parallel all through my work with *Milk of the Cipher*. The same thing right now is the 'dialogue with the unknown'. Dialogue being the movement and the unknown being the performance.

A double paradox. (laughs)

Paradoxes that were metaphors. I have the individual movements now in my pieces. I have no images..I am just obscuring how movement is performed. And the only unifying thing is the metaphor of the paradox which is the meditation for the performer to really get into the act.

What is it that you feel you have been evolving?

A stricter ethics for the participant. In other words, it is harder and it is more demanding, and the participant doesn't have the relief that the images provided, where they could go from one image to another, to another and so on. Now there is no relief for the whole piece. You practice one meditation from beginning to end of the dance.

When you get a whole new group of people together and they have all enrolled for a large group workshop, do you feel there are stages that you need to take them through? Or that there is an unfolding?

No. I assume everybody can be right with me. I'm just as happy wherever I start then. Sometimes I think it doesn't work on my behalf. Sometimes I think it works for people. I mean I think some people will never know what I am talking about. And other people just fall right into it. I think it is six of one and half a dozen of the other. And I choose to go for the dozen. I assume everybody can be right with me. And if there are enough people in the group who can reflect back the strength of the practice, I think it often makes it easier for people because they are surrounded by it. I also think my language has got better – my ability to communicate. My teaching has become a lot clearer. My words, you know...I feel I am able to ask the group much more clearly. I think it is coming from a deeper place, so people understand me. I think more people understand me immediately now than did ten years ago.

You said recently that you feel in workshops you are – I'm not sure whether you said teaching – but it was the process of the process. Or, in terms of choreography what you are interested

in is choreographing the process of the process of being a performer. So, what is the process of the process of being? Presence. It is about a willingness to not know. To not be afraid of not knowing. And to be curious about continuing to engage in it. That is what I would say is the guts of the process of the process.

I guess I'm more interested in talking about this whole dance therapy stuff. I don't like it. I mean I'm sure it serves some people. But I don't like it. I don't like seeing people seen that way. I don't like the idea that all movement isn't miraculous. I think rather if people were encouraged to be seen as they are. I would hate it if everybody walked around looking like 'Alexander bodies'. I love seeing your body change, but...I love our differences. I think that's why we're here, and we could be getting so much if we were not intimidated or felt less because of the particular tensions that create a certain musculature. If we were right out there with it I think we could just have a greater impact on the whole visual field of humanity.

To me, ironically, if someone is really practising the Alexander technique, then this is the same thing. Because it is about really being in the moment. And if somebody, to me, is really in the moment accepting themselves then they have a lower tension, they let it go. So they actually do integrate. There is an integration that happens and a wholeness that happens. And in a way Alexander technique is just another avenue to try and access that place. And I think a lot of the body therapies are. So, actually, there shouldn't be an Alexander body. My vision of it is that through Alexander technique – and I don't like the word technique, it is more of a principle – everybody does get in touch with their own indigenous way of moving. So I still feel the fundamental question is – you say you are not consciously setting about to teach workshop participants anything or to have any preconception about what they take away. And yet they do feel they learn something and they do take something away.

Oh, no. I was hoping they would walk away with some of these tricks, that they can practise playing on themselves at any time. That's what I can offer them, the tricks to play on themselves when they remember to.

I find them more than tricks. I find that somehow it seems like

you are lessening it by calling them tricks.

Well, there is something tongue in cheek in calling them tricks. It is a subversive use of language, of image. But, you know, I like the idea of playing tricks. I think I've always been attracted to magicians. And I do feel that they are tricks in a poetic sense because by implying that, they kind of open up worlds.

The strategies I have witnessed in your work in the two classes I have done this time is you stating that you are not the teacher, but the action of 53 trillion cells of each individual is the teacher. You have actually described it as a trick. How are you thinking of the trick working. And could you talk a little bit about the body as a teacher?

I think the whole body as the teacher is a way to shift immediately into meditation, to get out of your mind. Because if you even make an effort to pay attention to the 53 trillion cells or more, you are waking up the body and quieting the chattering mind. So in a way I feel like the whole body at once as a teacher is a way to go – it is like a mantra – to enter into full meditation. If I am listening to my whole body at once as a teacher, my mind is still. The mind is the whole body at once moving. Registering and surrendering, and registering and surrendering, registering and surrendering.

And from that registering and surrendering of the 53 trillion cells you have often suggested there is an unfolding that occurs. What is that unfolding? What is your experience of that unfolding?

Well, I am discovering the dance at the same time as the dance is being seen by an audience discovering me. In other words, I am being perceived – or even if I am my own witness I am seeing myself – and that is an intimacy, that is such an intimate experience. And that's what I call the unfolding. I don't know ahead of time, nor do I hold onto what just occurred. And so by my intimacy and my curiosity – my curiosity about this moment, and this moment and this moment and this moment, the visibility of that intimacy is the unfolding.

And you feel that what you do is meditate rather than..

What I do is meditate rather than improvise.

What is the difference?

Well, meditation is all encompassing. There is no room for anything except for meditation. It is total activity being played by 53 trillion cells or more at once. 'Improvise' leaves some room in my mind: there is no room in meditation except to practise fully the meditation. Maybe it is my limited view of improvisation.

How do you relate to someone saying they find your work therapeutic?

Not unhappy that they find it that way. That isn't its intention. It is not setting out to be therapeutic.

If someone asked you to teach a dance workshop to a group of psychiatric patients, what would you do?

I have no idea. I might ask them to just dance.

Would you say anything?

Yes. If I felt safe.

And if they felt better how would you interpret that?

I don't know. I feel an enormous amount of love come out of me when I am dancing. Love just gets aroused immediately when I dance. And I feel a lot of love from everyone when I am dancing.

So what you are really saying is that your teaching is more your practising?

Oh, yes.

Are you teaching practising, meditating, being 53 trillion cells in dialogue? Or are you being 53 trillion cells in dialogue with a group of people?

I am practising that with a group of people. I don't feel like I teach it, because I don't know what it is. I just feel like I set up a proposition. I set up the rules of the game and I just assume everybody is playing.

What are the rules?

Well, right now it would be dialogue with the unknown. That's the rule that I am playing. Those are the rules that I am playing right now. Essentially the rule of the game is maintaining that paradox of dialoguing with the unknown.

1 Published by Duke University Press:
Durham and London 1994

2 *The Drama Review* published by
University of Chicago Press; Chicago



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WRITINGS ON DANCE 14
EXPLORING THE NEW DANCE AESTHETIC

EDITORS / PUBLISHERS
Elizabeth Dempster Sally Gardner

ISSN 0817 - 3710
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Writings on Dance and the authors

DESIGN Ian Robertson
SCANNING The Scan Shop, South Melbourne
FILMWORK / PRINTING Impact Printing, Brunswick

All correspondence to *Writings on Dance*
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Writings on Dance is assisted by the Australia Council,
the federal government's arts funding and advisory body, and Arts Victoria,
a division of the Ministry for Arts, Sport and Tourism.

Forthcoming...

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THE VIEW FROM

FRANCE

France is the home of contemporary cultural theory. It is therefore not surprising that there is a growing interest amongst some writers in France in approaching dance practices with the insights offered by these theoretical perspectives. This issue will reflect upon the impact of French critical and cultural traditions and will feature the work of a number of contemporary French artists and writers.

Contributors include Laurence Louppe, Maguy Marin, Philipa Rothfield and David Williams.

