

SPRING 1987

Writings *on Dance* 2

DOCUMENTATION: THE PROBLEM OF RECORDING DANCE

TALKING DANCES

CRITICAL

DEBORAH HAY IN AUSTRALIA

ANNA HALPRIN'S CIRCLE THE EARTH

WRITING THE PAST DANCE IDEOLOGIES

THE PROMISE OF PAROCHIALISM

ISSUES

THE STATE OF THE ART

THE LITERATURE OF LEGS: POSTMODERNISM

Writings
on Dance
2

**CRITICAL
ISSUES**

Writings on Dance
2. Critical Issues

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PREFACE

Today it goes without saying
that nothing concerning art
goes without saying,
much less without thinking.

THEODOR ADORNO

The papers and reviews published here present a range of positions on and responses to the issue of critical practice in dance. They are presented in the belief that the development of a critical language for talking and writing about dance is crucial to its establishment and growth as an independent art form in Australia.

In June 1986 the Writings on Dance Collective* began meeting on a regular basis to discuss the issue of dance criticism. Our subject was seen to encompass various debates and various types of writing — not only reviewing for newspapers and magazines but also documentation, critical analysis and theory. It was agreed that writing about dance can be a literary practice in its own right, extending that realm of experience which can be brought into literate consciousness. We also acknowledged that the intentions behind these different kinds of writing can overlap — reviews can form part of documentation for example — and that this overlapping can be problematic: if we use writing about a particular performance to elaborate a theory for example, the question arises as to what extent we are actually writing about and addressing that performance. Common to all these kinds of writing about dance are fundamental problems of how to see, remember and describe dance: of how to translate experiences from one medium or language to another.

In seeking to address the area of reviewing our method was to write individual responses to dance performances using the meetings to discuss problems and issues that emerged from that practice. Discussions were informed by readings in cultural theory and other art criticism.

It was felt important that issues be considered not only in a general way but in relation to our own time and place. Questions arose as to the role(s) of the critic in Australia today. Where do his or her responsibilities lie? Should a reviewer be educated in dance or is there something to be said for a point of view that is formed outside that body of knowledge?

The reviews that are included in this edition are some of the fruits of our brief labours, and we are aware that in making them public we encounter, and to some extent produce, another set of problems. In the absence of a context where numerous public responses to an event are made, a single review inevitably takes on a degree of authority. Is it possible to write and publish without taking on this authority especially when we choose to review work that is less likely to have been recorded and commented upon elsewhere? Secondly, are we privileging, helping to bring into existence, the work that is covered here at the expense of that which is not? There is no question that we found the task of writing reviews difficult and problematic, but the discussions that took place in response to such attempts were illuminating and rewarding. Inevitably, more questions were raised than answered, but this outcome, in this context, is we believe an appropriate one.

SALLY GARDNER ELIZABETH DEMPSTER
for Writings on Dance

*Christine Babinskas, Elizabeth Dempster, Susie Fraser, Sally Gardner, Linda Leah, Rick Mitchell, Beth Shelton, Hellen Sky, Sylvia Staehli, Jude Walton.

ELIZABETH DEMPSTER

*ALONE AND
PALELY LOITERING:
THE PROMISE OF
PAROCHIALISM*

Contemporary dance¹ in Australia stands curiously and silently apart; isolated from its American and European heritage, distanced from, and seemingly irrelevant to the body of critical and theoretical discourse which has developed in relation to contemporary practice in the visual arts, literature and film.²

In contrast to artists working in the fields of painting and writing for example, our choreographers have not yet established a reputation of any great significance in the arts community internationally. Neither is the work of Australian dancers and choreographers registering as part of debates which are focusing and interrogating practice across the arts within this country.

The subject of the present article is not the work of dance practitioners per se, and furthermore it would be unwise to attempt to draw conclusions, negative or otherwise, from these few general observations. These opening statements merely gesture towards broad parameters within which the article is situated. Its focus is upon the representation of the art form in the public arena — in the press, in academic and other journals, in live debates and conferences; in brief, on the discourse which surrounds it. Dancers and choreographers in Australia are not necessarily working in ignorance of current social, political and aesthetic debates, but the production and reception of dance works is very rarely subject to public discussion in terms of such debates, and the forums which exist for discussion are few.

* * *

The story of the development of contemporary dance in Australia is at the present time a shadowy one, an imprecisely drawn collection of disparate tales of immigrations and emigrations, of dislocation, appropriation and adaptation. It is a narrative marked by borrowing and bricolage, where source and original context are sometimes acknowledged, more often obscured and disguised.³

No systematic documentation or analysis of Australian contemporary dance has been undertaken;⁴ histories remain unwritten, genealogies untraced. Australian dance suffers from an underdeveloped sense of history, and more particularly, from a limited awareness of how its own history intersects with, and is significantly influenced by, if not dependant on, developments occurring outside this country. Historical studies of dance which focus upon personal biography tend to be productive of somewhat limited insights — limited that is, with respect to wider questions of the definition and social significance of concert dance. A more valuable approach to the development of an historical perspective on contemporary dance in Australia would be one in which an attempt was made to describe changes in practice not merely in terms of the stories of individual lives, but in terms of sociocultural process as a whole.⁵

The lack of an articulated history, and absence of the consciousness-of-self implied by such an articulation, underlies the continuing failure of Australian dance to generate a rigorous critical discourse in which past and present practice is interrogated, evaluated and celebrated. Contemporary dance

in Australia remains a largely unsituated practice, a territory virtually uncharted, and one of ambiguous status. Whilst it is thus 'unmoored', it is in a condition of relative freedom from the weight of its own past, and from the pressure of comparison with the past and present achievements of overseas colleagues. Our geographical situation impedes access to the work of contemporaries in Europe and America, and there are some who would see advantage in this — (we are presumably, in this less culturally encumbered space freer to develop and define our own practice.). But to be unmoored for any length of time is also to be directionless, and to risk the chill of lengthy periods of isolation. In failing to locate and define itself in history, Australian contemporary dance condemns itself to the promise of the title.

* * *

The development of historical, critical and philosophical studies have contributed substantially to the development of art forms. Clearly the arts have benefited from exchanges between the culture of creation and the culture of commentary.⁶

GORDON FANCHER (1981/82)

Dance in Australia has not received the attention that has been accorded other arts, especially with respect to more extended commentary and analysis, and the dance periodicals which are currently produced here, although serving useful purposes, are not orientated to the provision of in-depth critical inquiry. The persistently low level of debate on the place, status, achievements and direction of Australian contemporary dance should be a matter of deep concern to all connected with the art: to dancers and choreographers, dance educators, dance critics and dance audiences. In the absence of substantial evidence to the contrary, one might assume that this impoverished critical practice is simply the mirror and measure of an impoverished and essentially trivial art; that Australian dance not only has not, but is not capable of generating a distinctive creative and critical voice.

The relationship existing between critical and creative production is complex, and not one that can properly be reduced to a simple equation, i.e. the quality of critical production = the quality of choreographic production. It is similarly untenable to locate responsibility for the inadequate represen-

1. The use of terminology to describe and define forms of concert dance other than classical ballet is confused and inconsistent at best. For the purposes of the present article the term "contemporary dance" may be taken to include modern and post-modern genres and styles of dance which do not reference the vocabulary or traditions of classical ballet, and contemporary ballet which utilizes an adapted and modified ballet lexicon.

2. For example: Yvonne Rainer, dancer, choreographer, now film-maker, has been credited with coining the term 'post-modern'. She utilized that term in the definition of new developments in dance in the 1960's and 70's. Despite the recent proliferation of texts concerning post-modernism, the place of dance in this debate has not, as yet, been re-examined. Similarly, in relation to feminist critical practice: Professional dance is, in the Western world, a predominately female occupation, and yet it has not been the subject of any feminist analyses of the kind and quality undertaken of film and literature.

3. Russell Dumas' *Small Appropriations* (Feb '86) is a rare example of a work by an Australian choreographer which overtly utilizes processes of quotation and bricolage. In this piece Dumas references the work of Trisha Brown (*Locus*), Lisa Kraus (*50 moves in 30 seconds*), and quotes extensively from his own *Local Motion*. Needless to say, the audience for contemporary dance in Australia is, with some exceptions, not sufficiently dance literate to recognize or appreciate the subtleties of quotation; nor to detect the deliberate disguising of appropriation which is plagiarism (a more common habit in some contemporary dance circles).

4. Edward Pask's survey of the development of theatrical dance in Australia in *Enter the Colonies Dancing*, and the sequel volume *Ballet in Australia. The Second Act. 1940-1980*, takes as its reference the classical ballet. All dance is seen in relation to, or subsumed into, that category. Dance works that cannot be easily accommodated under the umbrella term 'ballet', are omitted. The early years of Dance Exchange, and the seminal work produced by Nanette Hassall, Eva Karczag and Russell Dumas during that period, are not mentioned — a glaring omission in my opinion.

5. For an example of this approach see *The Public and the Performance: Essays in the History of French and German Theater* by Michael Hays. UMI Research Press.

6. Gordon Fancher 1981. ed. *Philosophical Essays on Dance*. Dance Horizons. New York.

tation of contemporary dance solely on one side of the relationship — with the journalist/critic, for example. Because of its immediately felt effects on morale, box office, etc. the critic's work naturally concerns many dancers. But there are many factors which determine whether or not, and in what manner, dance is publicly discussed, and the reviewing of dance in the daily press is but one aspect of critical production. Reviewers may indeed be unsympathetic, and lack appropriate background to assess new work. They may watch and write in ignorance. But it is also the case that dances can be tired and complacent, asking no questions of themselves or of their origins. Not all dance provokes, or even lends itself to intelligent response and analysis; and some dancers and audiences, satisfied with a definition of dance as entertainment, would ask, 'why should it?'

The 'culture of creation' and the 'culture of commentary' are implicated one within the life of the other; and the critical endeavour is not necessarily a rear-guard action, occurring always after, and in response to the event. One need only think of the manner in which artists' manifestos and critical writings (eg. Yvonne Rainer's *Quasi Survey of Some Minimalist Tendencies*)⁷ have significantly shaped practice, to be disabused of such a notion. Similarly, we could be reminded of the work of critic Jill Johnston, whose vigorous advocacy of the work of the Judson group stimulated considerable interest and support for experimental dance in the 1960's and early '70's.⁸

I am anxious to indicate that dance artists are in some measure responsible for the context and quality of debate within which their work exists. This is not to further burden with guilt the already beleaguered dancer, but to point to the importance of seeking means by which we, as concerned practitioners can effect change with respect to the reporting, representation and evaluation of our work.

That we face considerable difficulties in lifting the tenor and quality of discourse is undeniable, and it would be fair to say that at the present time we lack a structural and institutional framework for such a project. By way of example we could contrast the current situation in Australia with that of the U.S.A., where there have been opportunities for practical and scholarly study of dance in universities since the 1920's, at graduate and post-graduate level. The university is traditionally a site and support for scholarship, research and critical inquiry. Dance is barely represented within the Australian university system, and this lack of representation is not only an effect of, but also a factor contributing to the perpetuation of the low status of dance in Australian society.

The dance programs based in colleges of advanced education around the country are primarily orientated to the provision of pre-professional training for dancers and dance teachers. They are not resourced, and neither has it been their primary intention, to conduct research, to contribute to scholarly knowledge about dance, or to train scholars in the field. In making these observations I am not suggesting that an academic setting is the only, or necessarily the most appropriate context for discussion, debate and inquiry into dance, but it must be one of a range of possible contexts developed in Australia.

Another kind of questioning and investigation could be located within dance training institutions. In *Reading Dancing* Susan Foster⁹ comments upon how the processes of "making a dance and making a dancer are bound together." This inter-dependance is as true of the classical ballet as it is of exploratory new work in dance. In dance training the body of the dancer is shaped to a precise

7. See Yvonne Rainer's *Work 1961-73*. New York. New York University Press. 1974.

8. For reference to the work of Jill Johnston, the Village Voice, and Judson Dance Theater, see Sally Banes' *Democracy's Body: Judson Dance Theater 1962-1964*. UMI Research Press. Michigan. 1983.

9. Susan Leigh Foster. *Reading Dancing. Bodies and Subjects in American Contemporary Dance*. University of California Press. 1986.

10. I wish to acknowledge Russel Dumas' work in this area. Some readers will be aware of Dumas' presentation at the *Dance Outback of Beyond* forum held at the Performance Space, Sydney, Aug. '86.

11. In this article the process of choreographing dance is understood to be an art practice which may involve, but is not reducible to, a drafting process, i.e. to the organization of already established lexicons of movement. A training program which is conceptually restricted, and orientated exclusively to the acquisition of an expanded physical vocabulary, will, I suggest, yield only limited insights into the nature of choreographic process.

articulation; the dancer is defined by, produced, in response to choreographic demands.¹⁰ Contemporary dance training should properly be concerning itself with the relationship between technique and choreographic intention. What kind of intelligences are being placed in the body, and for what purpose? However, the issues contained within the whole question of training and technique in contemporary dance are, it seems, relatively unexamined. Institutionally based training programs appear to be guided by a belief that contemporary dance can be taught and learnt, just as classical ballet can be taught and learnt, in a relatively unproblematic way. But contemporary dance is heterogeneous and evolving; it is not a universally codified and conventionalized form. Techniques have developed, and are developing, in response to the choreographic vision of individual artists working in a variety of contexts. It is necessary to ask what contemporary dance training might be when it is not in this responsive relationship to choreographic process.

Classical ballet training prepares a dancer for the dancing of classical ballet. Similarly Graham training prepares and defines Graham dancers for Graham choreographies. Of what precise value is contemporary technique, be it Graham, Limon or Cunningham, in the absence of even a passive access to Graham, Limon, and Cunningham dances?

That these techniques have value in the development of the dancer's range and skill of physical articulation is undeniable, but the trainee-dancer in Australia has limited access to the choreographic intent of such physical articulation, and is offered little insight into the cultural, social and political contexts in which the various techniques evolved.

The finest contemporary dance presents not only new physical challenges, but also intellectual ones, and the development of an integrated understanding of the physical, emotional and intellectual resonances of the choreographic output of twentieth century dance artists should be the central focus of comprehensive contemporary dance education. When training is defined narrowly as concerning itself only with the physical craft of dancing, and the craft is not contextualized, significant educational opportunities are overlooked. If student dancers are not encouraged to inquire into the basis of art practice in dance, in conjunction with the necessarily intensive physical training they undergo, then their ability to contribute intelligently to ongoing choreographic development and to critical inquiry will be limited.¹¹

* * *

Contemporary dance has been presumed to be an unproblematic practice in Australia, but it is not unproblematic, only undebated. A lack of debate is evident in all areas of dance practice — in training, in the production, reception, analysis and evaluation of dance. What are we teaching? What are we dancing? And what are we talking about, precisely, when we speak of 'contemporary dance' in Australia? If there is no debate, or debate which concerns itself only with the achievement of short term political or financial goals, then what criteria exist for the evaluation of work, and the prioritizing of resources available for the support of dance? Where other more stringently argued criteria are lacking, the significance and value of choreographic work is assumed to be equatable with the degree of visibility and popular support it enjoys. Such a limited, short-term perspective privileges the familiar, the 'tried-and-true', and the immediately entertaining dance, and obscures the value of unfamiliar, difficult, demanding or exploratory dance work, work which may well, with respect to the long term development of the art form, have greater significance. These are major issues, issues which should concern all members of the dance community in Australia, and which cannot properly be left to any one sector — not to the critics, not to the funding bodies and arts bureaucrats, nor to dance educators. It has been said that dancers must dance. Certainly. But does that also mean that dancers must wait, like mute handmaidens, for some other voice to speak of and for them? I believe not. We are all implicated, and if there are comforts in parochial perspectives they must be resisted in favour of a more rigorously argued, more 'hard-fought-for' critical climate.

MAY 1987

R I C K M I T C H E L L

talking dances ...

(& writing)

“Our age is unlike any other in that its greatest works
of art were constructed in one spirit and received in another.”

The Geography of the Imagination, Guy Davenport

For Julian Beck & Joseph Beuys
(both thoughtful activists
& generous of spirit)

talking to Kris Hemensley about people who find some artwork ‘difficult’, & how they often reach for the ‘form’ to talk about critically, i realized that often it’s not the ‘form’ but the ‘content’ that’s ‘difficult’. no-one but the merely clever (fatuous) aims to be difficult — everyone wants their work to be seen or read well. but oftentimes people who find a work difficult simply don’t connect with what the piece is about — and for some reason don’t see that lack of connection.

too often we need to feel something is familiar before we will recognize it.
recognition does not always presuppose familiarity.

*

i sense that critics sometimes see themselves as guardians.
is it necessary to be conservative to preserve?

critics as historians (transcribers of experience)
what is this drive to be remembered?
maybe history is a place where we can find the ideas of others.

(i am not interested in writing criticism myself, but i am interested in how criticism might contribute to an
ART community’s sense of itself)

criticism as censorship:

the critic says — I would like your next dance to be more like this

in essence critics are saying: for ME, this is DANCE

i believe that the best criticism is written by people whose responses to a performance are not limited to the time and place of that performance. people whose ways of living are directly affected by what they might experience.

“Criticism is always a form of intervention: intervention between the work of art and its public. In most cases very little depends upon this intervention. Occasionally, however, criticism can be creative — not so much by virtue of its quality of perception as by virtue of the circumstances upon which it may act.”

Art and Revolution, John Berger

there is perhaps no human activity that may not fall within the limits of what may be called ART. given this, what is of interest is how the **values** given voice by an artwork belong to the society in which the artwork occurs, (or even how much attention any one artwork is accorded).

so much of politics/philosophy/& criticism is just allocating people & their ideas to categories. often buried beneath this process is a hierarchy of worth. but it is ever that simple?

even if someone is trying to be identified with a certain way of dancing/thinking, (or even just a specific group of people) — is this where the meaning of that person can be said to rest? — in simply seeking to be identified with others?

i think, maybe this categorizing is just a screen, on which it is easier to concentrate; rather than seeking what lies behind

we are all critics, however briefly:

as soon as someone asks me what i think of a dance, i, of necessity, engage in the activity of criticism.

*

how can the language of ideas enter the body of dance?

“All ideas rise like music from the physical.” *Ecologues*, Guy Davenport

what is it necessary to say to a dancer?

*

the simplicity experienced in a moment of understanding is an experience of the act of understanding itself, & not a reduction of the complexity of the material understood. so . . . one should not deliberately seek to make things appear simple, but rather seek a constant sense of expansion into

they seem to say **what is**
would be a high compliment

some questions are best asked
& then addressed (inarticulately)

for me, certainty often has an accidental quality,
(maybe i could call it the accident of certainty)

*

when someone says: it is of value
or, this is of value
or, this is not to be valued,
i should ask myself: by whom?
for whom?
(only a person can value)
there is nothing all people will value,
regardless of what the demagogues say/write/or hope.

*

how does someone/something draw attention to itself?
if i say something is striking, what do i mean?

at a performance: what do i notice?
(what am i being directed to see?)
of what importance is what i notice?
how much can i know of what i notice?
or, can i always locate where my attention is?
(what i am doing; much less what i am seeing)
(&, there is often a difference between what i notice, & what i speak of; even as i write this)

can i look at someone dancing without **attributing** either intention or meaning?

when i look at a dance made by someone i know, or whose work i know —
what do i look for? (as opposed to see)
do i look for what i am familiar with? and, if i do look for the familiar, what provokes this feeling of
familiarity?
(i would like to think that it has something to do with the attitudes & qualities that the maker/s
have brought to the making of this dance.
perhaps these qualities vibrate in both the dancers & myself)

*

what-may-be-seen is the totality of what may occur in a performance. this includes (but not includes exclusively) what the performance maker knows (or assumes) is of the performance.
(there are always many moments, actions, interactions, activities, & intentions that are performed in spite of its maker/s.)

what-any-one-person-sees is the point at which that particular audience meets this particular performance.

it is convention that shapes an audience member's participation at any performance. conventions are established by the performers' attitude & approach to the audience (both as individuals & as a group).
no-one is bound to follow convention.
(that last sentence is too easy to write.)

sometimes for understanding it is necessary to **conceptualize**:

to shuffle experiences into another shape (form)

(perhaps into another arrangement)

maybe if critics can display this process in their writing/talking . . .

— the actual movement that gives birth
to understandings . . .

— gestures that expand

*

i like to distinguish between statements that are merely assertions, & statements that are contributing to a dialogue — a shifting/sifting for a meeting in truth

thinking about the power of rhetoric & the drive for cultural hegemony:

people should think as individuals

(or at least be encouraged to . . .)

but act socially

(or at least with thought for their possible effect/affect).

how to write with neither seduction nor dogma?

*

Q: when i speak/act/dance how much of an eye do i have for the future?

or (do i ask myself, is this how i would like to be remembered?)

as an artist (not a seeker of funds/respect/status) what do i care of how my work is perceived?

do i always want to be seen as i might see myself?

when i make a performance:

whose aspirations do i express?

performing may be a kind of hoping,

(a kind of)

yearning for a time when

things would be as they are

*

it's not that i have things to say (here & elsewhere), but that i have things to **do**. & yet saying with its implication of —

speaker

spoken

listener

— is the theoretical model for performance

that is —

choreographer:: > speaker
dancer:: >

choreography::spoken

audience::listener

or perhaps even —

choreographer::writer

choreography::text

dancer::translator

audience::reader

but this model, with its emphasis on the relationships between identifiable fragments, does not correspond with my experience of the best performances, where all things tend to **coalesce**

(not fragment)

Q. how should someone see, (or experience) something **being done**?

i think, with a level of **participation**.

participation (here) as a kind of meeting through & around
an activity & its ideas

i resist the social structures, & personal choices that seek to define by notating differences rather than celebrating the connections that are
between

if i have a theory about someone's work (or actions) & some example of an (artist's) work —
do not measure the work against the theory, but
the theory against the work (actions)

for any theory (in our culture) embodies a movement towards universality — a drive to be a general theory —
a willingness to ignore its own limitations (or limited applications)
& any theory matched against an example of a practice will have to admit exceptions.

it is in the gap between the work's practice & the theory that one of the tensions of learning lies

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SYLVIA STAEHLI

DOCUMENTATION,
DISCOURSE AND
DEVELOPMENT

— THE PROBLEM OF
RECORDING DANCE

“Our intelligence, like our activity, presents two very different forms: on the one hand, are sensations and sensory tendencies; on the other conceptual thought and moral activity... We understand only when we think in concepts. But sensory reality is not made to enter the framework of our concepts spontaneously and by itself. It resists, and in order to make it conform, we have to do some violence to it, we have to submit it to all sorts of laborious operations that alter it so that the mind can assimilate it. However, we never completely succeed in triumphing over its resistance. Our concepts never succeed in mastering our sensations and in translating them completely into intelligible forms. They take on a conceptual form only by losing that which is most concrete in them, that which causes them to speak to our sensory being and to involve it in action, and, in so doing, they become something fixed and dead. Therefore, we cannot understand things without partially renouncing a feeling for their life, and we cannot feel that life without renouncing the understanding of it”

EMILE DURKHEIM, 1914

In the narrowest sense of the word expression we say that what is expressed in art are feelings — an emotional attribute. But we can also ascribe other labels to dance movements. These include an extensive range of human qualities that refer to personality traits, attitudes, ways of being such as generosity, aloofness, and wit. And further, beyond emotion and these 'anthropomorphic' qualities, there is the expression of ideas which can be communicated through movement.¹

Meaning is a function of relationship; the meaningfulness of bodily expressivity is a function of its deliberate intention to make the observer notice something about the communicator and/or the world.

In terms of Western art, dance notation is essentially a 'thinking tool' for the performer, a means to generate and express ideas, a set of instructions, and a language for discussing those ideas with others. Painting, sculpture, architecture and music, having a propensity for graphic representation, can leave behind evidence of their existence and development. Much that has been created in the sphere of movement has died with its creators, due to the absence of adequate means of notation.

Has dance, because of this, been prevented from developing and moving forwards on the level of the other arts?

Rudolph Laban believed that the future of dance depends on the number of people who can read and write dance, at least in its simplest forms.

I READING DANCE

Perception is relative, it is active, it is constructive, it is prognostic... Each culture constructs its own reality — and within certain culturally inherited constraints, so does every individual... Our perception may be influenced by contextual things, or by passing preoccupations; even by our ever-fluctuating bio-chemical constitution.²

According to Gerald Myers³ we never experience a work of art in exactly the same way each time we see it. There are many reasons for this, not all of them intrinsic either to the work of art or to the sophistication of the eye, although both of these are significant.

How can we approach the complex problems of documenting dance when even critics and experts often do not 'see' alike?

Some critics say that they have certain facts to report such as time, date, the identities of the performers, historical background notes, certain points of comparison, and so on. Even fine descriptive writing, that successfully pictures what occurred on stage may fail to capture and record the subtleties of the movement qualities.

In all the arts the basic item of appreciation is quality: the quality of the brush stroke, the quality of sound, the quality of oral delivery and so on. In dance it is the quality of movement. Of course, says Myers, there is much more to the art of dance, such as the choreography, the use of music, costumes, props, lighting, the relationship between performers, the particular use of space and time and so on. But if anything is the 'bottomline' in an "exposition of what is special about the art of dancing" it is the movement quality.

1. N. Carroll, "Post-Modern Dance and Expression", in *Philosophical Essays on Dance*, 1981, pp 97-98.

2. P. McGillick, *Performance Art and Semiotics*, Festival of Performance Art, Canberra, 1980 p. 2.

3. G. Myers, "Do You See What the Critic Sees?", in *Philosophical Essays on Dance*, 1976, pp 33-48.

The dancer uses his/her own body to make that itself into the art work. The development of movement qualities 'on' ones own body is as essential to being an art work as it is to servicing the choreography.⁴

But can the variability and elusiveness of qualities of movement be explained satisfactorily?

Here, says Myers, we arrive at a 'philosophical dilemma'. We either conclude that the qualities of movement are 'objective' features of the dancer's movement — even though extraordinarily elusive — or, they are 'subjective' and merely a matter of taste — individualistic and illusory, in the eye of the beholder. But we wouldn't argue, he goes on to say that the softness of cloth is purely subjective, a quality of our response to the cloth rather than of the cloth itself. Why then contend that the quality of an individuals' dancing belongs to our response rather than to the dancing itself?

Myers' explanation proceeds on the premise that thinking and seeing are somehow intertwined. Even though we may agree that a particular colour is blue we may disagree that the blue is 'cool'. This does not however, establish its subjectivity. It shows, he claims, that our perception of aesthetic qualities is dependent on our frame of mind; on whether our perceiving emphasises this or that feature of the thing we see, and generally our preconceptions.

So quality perception may change depending on slight changes in perceptual circumstances. What we need to recognize is that our 'mental set' is a condition for perceiving qualities.

Movement qualities are the result of personality, of height and weight, of involuntary mannerisms, of rehearsed efforts, of musical response, of the whole body, or of an isolated part, and on and on... One must see as guided by a thinking that incorporates an understanding of dance technique, of choreographic tradition and innovation, of the relations of movement qualities to qualities found in the other arts, of Effort-Shape type analysis, etc...

Given the subtlety involved, it is not extraordinary that experts, critics, and dancers can see differently. To see alike, to notice the same simultaneous and successive display of movement qualities 'on' the dancer's body, in his movements, requires a similar 'mind-set'... and... involves the sharing of certain preconceptions as to what is being looked for and how one would recognize it...⁵

Subjectivism, warns Myers, is seductive. For one thing it is 'easier'. If you describe a piece of dancing as 'ragged' and friends and critics contest your judgement, you might find yourself retreating to, "Well it struck me as ragged" or "It seemed to me..." "made me feel like..."; and so on, these 'retreated-to' judgements abandon the original objectivistic claim that the dancing is ragged, and accepts that the raggedness is your response to the dancing. These retreated-to judgements are much easier to defend because you don't have to prove them, or argue for them. Everyone is prepared to admit to your right to your own responses.

Why should we reject this form of subjectivism in favour of objectivism?

Firstly, and importantly, we must not deter dancers by asserting that qualities of movement which they rehearse diligently depend on the viewer's personal response. Secondly, some movement qualities do not appear to be objective, such as light, heavy, rapid, slow, continuous, jerky, contracted, etc. Given the objective reality of some qualities then, recognizing other qualities such as abandoned, expansive, and so on, should meet with less resistance.

4. G. Myers. *op.cit.*, p. 48.

5. G. Myers, *ibid.*

The artistic community, says Myers resigned to being at odds with critics' responses, has come to vote for subjectivism (at least in regard to criticism).

But where does this leave specific and accurate accounting of dance?

II DOCUMENTATION

Documentation must be regarded as an essential complement to dance theory and practice. The analysis of dance and movement requires appropriate knowledge and experience in identifying and evaluating the particular movement components of dance. Additionally, in actual performance there is constant change: no two performances can ever be identical. Non-deliberate actions and responses are introduced by the performers which are additional to the choreography and have to do with such things as emotional state, audience response, floor, etc.

In fact, how much of the movement can be written, and is it enough to know about movement texture alone?

We must first recognize that critical selection necessarily precedes the act of recording. One has to be very much aware, for instance, whether one wants to notate a choreography, following the intentions of its creator, or whether one wants to notate a particular execution of a dance. Other questions we must also ask are:

- for what purpose is the dance being recorded?
- who is the score written for and who will read it?
- are there universal shapes in human movement?
- how simplified should the notation be?
- what sort of movement are we notating?
- should the score include detailed Effort analysis?
- what of improvised movement?

and so on...and so on...

The problems of formulating an adequate, easily written notation are immense, and continual growth of movement vocabularies has tended to make existent systems obsolete.

A brief historical account of notational forms may serve here to further define the range of questions that have been, and might be asked about the recording of dance.

Unlike the development of complexity of European musical structure European ballet has evolved a classical simplicity, and a restricted movement vocabulary. Cultural editing eliminated much expressive movement of the torso, a deliberate exclusion of naturalistic body movements (especially noticeable in patterns adopted from national and peasant dances.)

Eighteenth century dance notation which afforded limited possibilities for innovation tended only to affirm, define and codify the socially acceptable dance behaviour of the feudal elite. Choreographers, sponsors, audience, and participants were in harmonious agreement about the

form, function and the symbolism of its dances. Any innovatory choreographic structures in Europe and the United States were, at that time, transmitted in limited scope to select groups of dancers who surrounded individual choreographers.⁶

One of the first methods of notation used in Europe was the use of abbreviations for the names of steps, such as s-simple, d-double. This system required previous knowledge of the steps, and despite its obvious limitations, lasted for about two hundred years.

In 1700 Feuillot published a recording of the steps and dances which form the basis of classical ballet, but the system showed little more than the footwork and floor patterns. A series of systems using stick figures placed under the musical staff were next developed. This form of notation depicts position not movement. Also, it is usually drawn from the observers point of view and has to be reversed by the reader. It does not indicate the three-dimensionality of the body. In 1895 Alexander Stepanov devised a notation based on anatomical knowledge of joint flexion and extension, abduction and adduction and rotation, and placed it on the musical staff. He also included qualitative aspects of duration, speed, rhythm, travelling movements and body turns. He was, however, still predominantly notating poses.

In 1928 two systems concerned with universal aspects of movement appeared. Both were based on sound anatomical analysis and were applicable to different forms of movement. The most successful and lasting of these was Rudolph Von Laban's 'Kinetography', which used the vertical staff to represent the body, allowing representation of right and left body sides. The elongated movement symbols, by their length, could indicate the exact duration of any movement. The system is based on spatial, anatomical, and dynamic principles. Interaction of spatial patterns with the rhythm of the steps and gestures give a certain characteristic to a movement sequence. All movement events have an ascent -towards going on, and a descent -towards stopping.

A Kinetogram gives information as to how they occur in the body, in space, and in time. In relating the particular structure and function of the human body to the three-dimensional extension of space surrounding it, Laban saw that the scaffolding of the icosahedron (20 faces) as the one most naturally suited as a model. It also allowed for the interplay with and easy transition to, other scaffolding detected as underlying various styles of dance. Any dance style, he claimed, with either traditional or self-imposed variations, must be built of the basic constituents of movement.

Laban set out to treat dance as a science, viewing the body as an instrument; a complicated system of cranes and levers of various dimensions. He insisted that dance movements could be identified as 'entities of their own' and in this way his work provides a basis for understanding similar preoccupations in contemporary dance.⁷

Laban, who was also a choreographer, was interested in all deviations and variations of movement typical for any community, social class or historical epoch. He particularly underlined the importance of Effort combinations as distinguishing characteristics of style. Thus, dynamic signs such as strong accent, vibrato, passive, etc., as well as Effort signs — formulated from the combinations of Weight, Space, Time and Flow — can be added to the notation to qualify the trace-forms of the Kinetograph. An example here might best illustrate the importance of Effort in the definition of dance style. A Javanese dancer studying American Modern Dance had mastered the form and pattern, but still looked Javanese in performance, thus changing the expressive meaning of the dance. An Effort analysis of the Javanese style would have shown that the Flow fluctuations are very small, giving the Flow an evenness that only

6. L. Ullman, "What Notated Movement Can Tell", in *Dance Studies*, Vol. 1, 1975, p. 33.

7. R. Goldberg, "Performance: The Art of Notation", p. 55.

gradually changes in a fluctuation of Bound to Free to Bound and so on. In contrast, the American Modern Dance style often has abrupt changes from highly Bound Flow to Free Flow.

Effort notation (Eukinetics in its earliest form) compliments Kinetography. While the latter asks 'What is movement?', the former asks, 'How is it performed?'. Effort notation is not just a mechanical transaction but as conceptual one. There is no fixed staff in Effort notation so it can be written horizontally or outside a Labanotation score. The skilled Labanotator, it is said, can see at a glance what is happening at any moment in every part of the body: whether the limbs and trunk act in synchrony or overlap in time. They can identify the rhythms and body/spatial tensions within movements which are the keys to expressive content.⁸

Movement scored in Labanotation outlines a 'trace-form' which has to be moulded with the whole body; interpretation is still left up to the performer. Verbal explanation, study of the source and the intention of the movement should be considered as necessary additions to the notation for full appreciation of the movement.

According to Rosalee Goldberg, opposition of the visual plane and spatial depth remain a complex problem in dance notation, only partly solved by Labanotation and the later Benesh figure notation. Traditional scores, like Kinetograms, are also cumbersome and complicated for a dancer to follow, particularly while moving in space. So the extensive dance archives in London and New York are used mostly by notation experts and translated verbally for the performers, rather than by the dancers themselves.

By the late '50's dance in American was moving away from

"expressionistic and technical virtuoso concerns to preoccupations with 'duration', 'space', and 'the body as a functional mechanism' . . . movement was no longer tied to the musical phrasing. Along with the costume and narrative gesture, music was considered a distraction from the 'essence' of movement. Rather, the body itself determined the nature of the work and the time taken to move that 'mechanism' became the underlying pulse of the work."⁹

Thus, says Goldberg, contemporary performers find the traditional systems outdated and inadequate for expressing current concerns in dance. Consequently, dancers, performers, and choreographers have developed their own private notation methods.

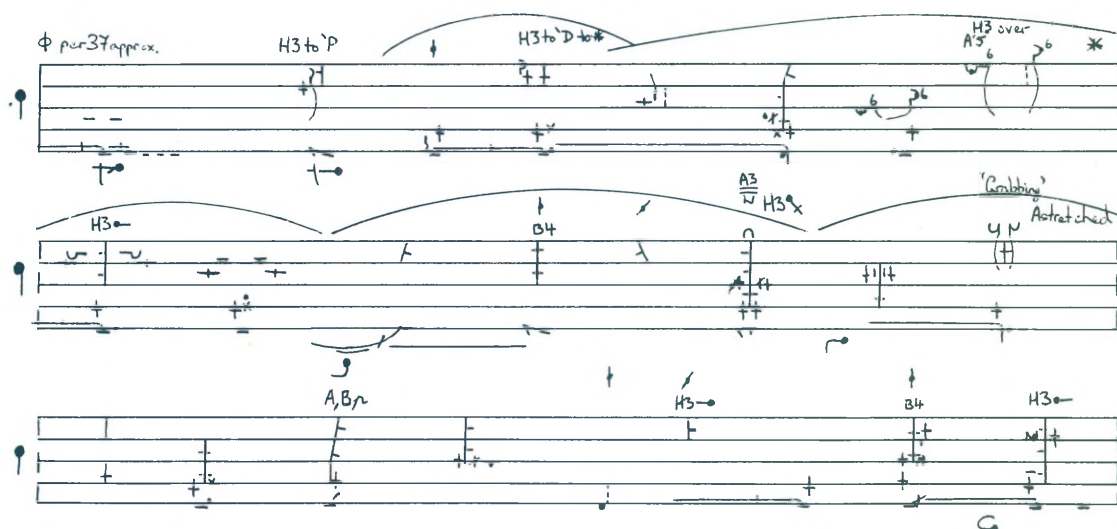
Anna Halprin, for instance, created numbered charts detailing all possible anatomical combinations of movement which were used as improvisational scores, by trained and untrained dancers.

Lucinda Childs' scores are diagrammatic studies of movement in space and time; numbers and arcs, and mathematically worked out diagrams, are for her the most precise means of addressing and notating time and space. They allow her to score the movements of several dancers simultaneously in intricately woven patterns.

In Laura Dean's "Circle Dance" (1972) all the work was calculated as mathematical cycles in score form. In performance there is no improvisation in the steps, only improvised qualities, that come from the personalities of the dancers themselves.

Trisha Brown, in 1975, used a diagram of a cube and some autobiographical information listed against corresponding numbers, as well as written descriptions and stick figures, as a score for the choreography of "Locus". Variations and the 'erosion' of the piece with each performance was part of the choreography. The scores she wrote only indicate potential movement, "they tell nothing about the flesh of the dance."¹⁰

In Post-Modern Dance, then, notation has become a choreographic method as well as a score for the performers.



Accadian Corridor: Sally's Solo Choreography: Nanette Hassall (1986) Notation: Jo Page using Benesh Notation.

In any discussion of movement notation it is inevitable that film and video be included. Film is seen by Ann Hutchinson¹¹ as a complement to notation — a tool 'for movement analysis and choreographic preservation'. Film and video have the advantage of endless repetition without change, but some distortion in the qualitative aspects (Effort) of the movement and in three-dimensionality do occur. In dance, says Hutchinson, the film provides a record — like a musical recording — of a "given performance of the work by a particular group under its director." The 'pure concept of the work', she goes on to say, needs to be recorded in notational form.

Merce Cunningham has recorded many early pieces in verbal transcripts, using stick figures where necessary. Since the easy accessibility of video, he has recorded more recent work on tape. This is filmed from two angles, front and side, with a back view reflected in a mirror. New company members learn dances through a mixture of video, notes, and their own interpretations. Cunningham has predicted that more complete records will be eventually obtained through the use of video and screen diagrams which will provide "a more accurate description of the choreography in-the-round and which will be large enough — using video screen projections — for the dancer to work from directly."¹²

Notation, as yet, has no general system to express contemporary attitudes. Rather, it is made up of a series of personal systems, which limits their readability to the performers themselves. Many performers feel that the development of a general system is essential. Without such a 'thinking tool', a 'descriptive tool' and even a 'conversational tool' the difficulty of using words to describe music, dance and live performance remains.¹³

The choice of documentational mode reflects the focus of the recorder of a particular event. There are, of course, some differences of opinion about which modes are most appropriate for different tasks but discussion hopefully continues!

8. I. Bartenieff and D. Lewis, *Body Movement — Coping with the Environment*, Gordon and Breach Science Publishers, N.Y. and London, 1980, pp. 218-25.

9. R. Goldberg, op.cit., p. 55.

10. Ibid., p. 57.

11. A. Hutchinson, *Labanotation*, London, 1970, pp. 7-8.

12. R. Goldberg, op.cit., p.56-7.

13. ibid., p. 56.

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* * *

WRITING

THE PAST DANCE

IDEOLOGIES

In February this year I had the opportunity to interview Trisha Brown in Perth where she and her company were performing as part of the Perth Festival. They presented two programmes which spanned work from 1971 through 1986.

I asked Trisha Brown what she thought about the quote from Sally Banes' book *Terpsichore in Sneakers* "...that your main concern is to find structures and schemes to organise movement rather than invention of movement per se"! She replied: "I think Sally is wrong. She is wrong over the whole picture, but she was right over a particular time. Dance is hard to talk about; critical writing about dance is not as advanced as one would think..."²

I asked later in the interview: "just going back to people writing about your work, I have heard a number of different people comment on Sally Banes' book that it was inaccurate, that it gave an inaccurate view of the situation and of people's work... How would you like your work discussed?" Trisha Brown: Well, I accept the fact that after a year and a half of work on a dance the first writings about it will never touch the choreography, and that means... the artness of what I do... Otherwise I could just do the decor and the music... that's what people usually talk about when [... they talk about my work]. There are descriptions of the movement that I think are really asinine, the squiggles and the wiggles — that is only one side of the story, I mean it is inaccurate. I know the work is sensuous and luscious, sequential movement, and that it is difficult to apply words that give off the ebullience of the dancing. And people try it by stringing words [together]... When I read a review of my work I wouldn't be so interested in going to see it because it doesn't have the substance of the effort in it. And I think it is a distinction about my work, that it is formally rigorous, which is very much more related to the visual arts than it is to dance. And I think dance criticism should take care not to indulge in the entertainment values that mire us and keep us from being a respectable art form... I think Sally's book was written too soon... We were both very young when it was written and it was also at a point when my work was changing and I had to understand how emphatically my work changes every five, six or seven years. So she locked me in a period of time that neither one of us should have allowed, but I didn't know. We should have said "this is the way it is right now, tune in again next year."³

* * *

The perception of time, of space, and the workings of the body were the three major preoccupations of the new, postmodern dance that grew out of [Robert] Dunn's workshop and the Judson Dance Theater.⁴

This statement by Sally Banes clearly exposes a number of issues. The elements of time, space and the workings of the body are surely not only the domain of this group of people, but are the material

that other people working in dance have researched; perhaps not in the same way, and with other components, but these are some of the basic substances of dance and were not exclusive to this 'group'.

The description of anything being new is problematic. The events that Banes recounts no doubt happened, but it is the interpretation of these facts, positing Robert Dunn's composition classes as "the beginning" with all activity stemming from there, which is open to question. Banes presents a view of history that establishes time lines and clear progressions, and that embraces the idea of a caesura in history, only to demonstrate that the Judson period marks a reactionary swing from everything that has gone on before. It is a gross simplification of what I imagine is a much more complex story.

There is always more than one activity going on at any given time; the history of dance or anything else does not progress simply from one stage to another. It is also doubtful, just taking into account the workings of any group that the Judson Dance Theater was such a cohesive one, that its aims, interests and aspirations can be discussed as if the Judson Dance Theater were one unified voice. Banes' writing seems to be an effort to close the event and the ideas up. By sealing them, the ideas actually become less interesting.

Why are such statements made, and such books written? To make a history; something that we can slot ourselves into; to give importance by creating a context. This always involves oversimplification and manipulation of facts to tell a story. It is interesting to find out about the past, however accounts should always be questioned and it should not be taken for granted that that is the way it happened. Making history is the act of writing it: There is never a recording of the facts, there is always a telling of a story that arranges the facts.

Perhaps there is another story to tell, or many other stories. Ones that don't isolate 'Judson' so much. It seems that Simone Forti was making work in 1961 that shared some common interests with the work going on at Judson.⁵ Some people at Judson and indeed also Simone Forti, had worked with Anna Halprin.⁶ Halprin's work at that time seems to merit equal interest.

The idea of a break with the past loses significance when the activities at Black Mountain College with John Cage and Merce Cunningham are taken into account.⁷ This was going on in the fifties as were the activities of James Waring.⁸ This was not the whole picture either. Activities of this nature — performance, events, happenings, non-matrixed performances⁹ using dance were not isolated to the Judson Church, but also took place in some downtown galleries, the Reuben Gallery for example.¹⁰ The dancers did not necessarily work in isolation but often in collaboration with visual artists, composers and sculptors, or presented their work on shared programmes.¹¹

It is always a much more complex web of activity, not a clean scenario where all the work of a particular time comes from one source. Sally Banes also terms the work Post-modern. What does she mean?

* * *

One of the concerns of this piece is the too water-tight writing of the history of dance in the last twenty years and for that matter the last 90; that the sense of history has been blocked into becoming the telling of a story of happenings, of activity, of people working in dance as a line of development structured by causal links or breaks. It is ironic that the plotting of the past into this type of history is completely at odds with post-modern thought in the more general cultural sphere.

In discussing the term post-modern, one feature that is particularly important is the notion of history and the particular relationship of post-modern art practice to the past and to history. This is part of the discourse of post-modernism in relation to the visual arts, architecture, film and literature in varying ways. But it is in dance?

For dance the term has come to identify a style and a period of time. In its most rigid definition it is made synonymous with the Judson Dance Theater, which then has a definite starting point and place: 1962 at the Judson Church, New York City, a group of people forming after having worked with Robert Dunn in composition classes at the Cunningham Studio.¹²

In terms of style the definition is no less rigid. A list of standard definitions could be: the non-matrixed performance, task-oriented movement, the use of pedestrian movement, changes in performance mode and the relationship of performer to viewer; also the interest in the language of movement and the components of time and space as the basis for work, though not in collusion with meaning as defined by narrative, music, symbolism or expressivity.¹³ And most importantly the notion of rebellion typified by the much quoted lines of Yvonne Rainer:

NO to spectacle no to virtuosity no to transformations and magic and make-believe no to glamour and transcendency of the star image no to the heroic no to the anti-heroic no to trash imagery no to involvement of performer or spectator no to style no to camp no to seduction of spectator by the wiles of the performer no to eccentricity no to moving or being moved.¹⁴

These lines have come to define a post-modern style of dance for many people. However when placed against a consideration of the wider cultural meanings of post-modernism this definition and usage can be seen to be somewhat peculiar to dance. The problems that Trisha Brown mentioned of there being little critical base for dance means that there are two ways to go: to align dance with other art forms such as the visual arts, to beg that it be seen and given the same critical space and import; or to allow dance to find its own language and sources — to see it for what it is and not in terms of “the other”¹⁵ It is finally unacceptable to superimpose the discourse of one activity onto another and hope that it fits somehow; to do so is to underline dance’s supposed inferiority as a medium.

But perhaps it is not a matter of an either/or situation. It is to the range of meanings and ideologies of the post modern and the discussion of the state of post-modernity that we might turn: to the discussion of post-modern culture and ideas.¹⁶ To look at all of this in relation to dance would reveal much about the work of now and the work of the past. What is proposed is a discussion of modernism and post-modernism in relation to dance, not simply a discussion of modern and post-modern dance.

JULY 1987

1. Sally Banes *Terpsichore in Sneakers* p. 86.
2. Interview with Trisha Brown February 1987.
3. Ibid.
4. Sally Banes *Democracy’s Body: the Judson Dance Theater 1962-1964* p. 21.
5. Robert Morris “Notes on Dance” *Tulane Drama Review* T30 P. 179.
6. Yvonne Rainer’s “Yvonne Rainer Interviews Ann Halprin” *TDR* T30 pp. 142-166.
7. Merce Cunningham in conversation with Jacqueline Leschaeve, *The Dancer and the Dance* pp. 51-56. See also Susan Leigh Foster *Reading Dancing* for her interpretation of the relation between Merce Cunningham’s work and “the people who presented work at the Judson Church.”
8. Don McDonough *The Complete Guide to Modern Dance* p. 394.
9. Michael Kirby “The New Theater” *TDR* T30.
10. Barbara Haskell *Blam: The Explosion of Pop, Minimalism and Performance 1958-1964* chronology pp. 154-148
11. Ibid.
12. Sally Banes *Democracy’s Body* Chapter one.
13. Susan Leigh Foster *Reading Dancing* p. 186.
14. Yvonne Rainer “?” *TDR* T30 p. 178.
15. Some discussion about dance makes it hide behind the texts of the “great thinkers”, perhaps in an effort to avoid discussing the work itself and finding a discourse specific to dance. I refer here to the *Writing on Dance* collective’s lecture/performance at which I had the distinct feeling that writing by authors such as Roland Barthes and Gertrude Stein were being used to prove the importance of what the collective were doing and saying.
16. The books dealing with Post-Modern culture in the bibliography (see overleaf), and many more, are of interest here.

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JUDE WALTON

*THE LITERATURE
OF LEGS:
POSTMODERNISM*

Victor Burgin
*The End of Art
Theory: Criticism and
Postmodernity* p. 193

Written texts have no "possible final closure of meaning upon a point of a certainty." They simply produce more work and make you have new ideas.

Dance suffers from the idiosyncratic use of terminology by which it identifies itself and in an attempt to counter this I have placed my discussion within a framework of postmodern thought drawing on theories of other art practices. Whether or not these issues are of concern or relevance to dancers and dance making is open to conjecture, I only pose the possibility. Inherent within this task were various problems which arose from reading and writing about dance in a postmodern context.

Within a spoken dialogue concepts which are not understood can be restated, questions can be deliberated and clarified, and answers discussed in the light of the ensuing conversation. The written word is removed from the person, but requires the same questioning and interrogation.

The label of 'dancer' or worse still the question 'what sort of dance?' always made me feel uncomfortable. There lacked common ground on which the questioner and I could stand in order to begin the discussion. I also realised from these repeated, agonising conversations that for my growth, intellectual stimulation, and development of ideas I turned to other artists rather than dancers. Why? Are dancers dull, devoid of any sustained, critical debate?

What produced my discomfort was not the label of 'dancer' per se, but the narrow, confined meaning it is imbued with in Australia.

Victor Burgin
*The End of Art Theory
Criticism and
Postmodernity*, p. 164

The postmodern "is not so much a concept as it is a problematic, a complex of heterogeneous but interrelated questions which will not be silenced by any spuriously unitary answer."

In the 19th Century what mattered was that artworks should be beautiful. Critical writing on dance in Australia, for the most part, is still locked into the notion that aesthetics equal beauty. Despite some dancers/choreographers efforts to interfere with this way of seeing, few people seem able to deal with the disjuncture caused by this strategy, this taking away of the harmonious unity of dance, or to understand what other concerns might be at play. Comments are made alluding to the fact that the sets, fragmentation of the movement, unrelatedness of the sound, all make the dance difficult to see, or that it's not really dance at all.

Also, questions which preoccupy a good deal of postmodern art dealing with perception, the transformation of reality into images, cognition, the distinction between physical objects and symbols, and the fragmentation of time are totally ignored in critical writing. When we are presented with such problems in the concrete form of the dance we are as Redfern notes "puzzled by the object or performance itself: perplexed how to take it."

At times I recognise similarities between the revered but unquestioned response to the label of 'the dancer' and that of 'the mother'. They are both considered wonderful, but apart from. They seem to be invested with a singularity of focus and a denial of the multitude of facets and interests that make up a person.

Betty Redfern, *Dance, Art and Aesthetics*.

As Redfern goes on to say "Thus attempts are made in postmodern literature to upset the symbolising function of words and to give more than usual prominence to their physicality: (in performance) movement as mere displacement of parts of the body is urged on the attention, so that any (eg purposeful or expressive) significance beyond that is thrown into question. By means such as constant repetition, unrelatedness, and a variety of other dislocating techniques, painted objects, movements, words and so forth are exhibited in such a way as to arouse doubt as regards their ontological status — what they really are."

The postmodern is by definition a position on the modern. It does by necessity require a knowledge of modern dance and the ability to see the quotations/references when they occur. Audiences are therefore likely to be initially composed of artists and intellectuals who already have knowledge of modernism.

If there is no known history of modernism there is nothing to react with.

Watching Shelley Lasica dance I recalled old film footage and photographs of Mary Wigman that I had seen while studying in England. I was aware of a similar awkwardness of posture, a dramatic, confronting placing of herself in the space and a disconnected relationship of body parts.

Postmodernism is concerned with the breakdown of the experience of time and the relationship between parts. What is created is a sense of perpetual present through isolated, disconnected, discontinuous parts

LINK

Choreographed by Wendy Morrow
Performed by Anne Thompson
and Wendy Morrow, Victorian College
of the Arts, 1985.



which fail to link into a continuous unity. As this temporal continuity breaks down it heightens the intensity of the present. In dance this can have the effect of making the sensory experience of each movement, phrase, sequence more vivid. This quality of becoming alters the viewer's perception of and reflection on the performance.

The way in which time is organised in a performance, the stillness between the movement to the point where you have almost forgotten what went before. Repetition of a gesture or phrase like the endless chanting or writing of a word, so that it changes its meaning and demands to be seen in different ways. Time compressed with an impossible number of variations, shifts and levels of content. Time extended.

Another element of the postmodern problematic is its erosion of the distinction between high and popular culture, for example, dances which include fragments and gestures of social, show, tap, ballroom, rap and non-western styles.

It is impossible to be outside of my given history and

institutions. Equally it is impossible to ignore my knowledge of the social, political and economic constructs of society when I watch a dance performance. Dance is not beyond or outside these considerations.

What is this romantic label of 'fame'. This aspiration to be known, to be remembered, to leave a mark of identity, an elaborate scrawling of a signature on a railway carriage.

Fredric Jameson
*Postmodernism and
Consumer Society*
p. 114 in *The Anti-Aesthetic*

"Pastiche is, like parody, the imitation of a peculiar or unique style, the wearing of a stylistic mask, speech in a dead language: but it is a neutral practice of such mimicry, without parody's ulterior motive, without the satirical impulse, without laughter, without that still latent feeling that there exists something normal compared to which, what is being imitated is rather comic."

I wonder how many dancers/choreographers think this element is present in their work? It is an unknowing use of pastiche that I question.

The label of postmodern is not easily applied. What audience members bring to the performance is as important as what the choreographer/dancer places in the space and intention often remains ambiguous.

Perhaps as the badge declares 'postmodern is old hat'.

Criticism in the arts is in crisis. New work is mentioned by one or two critics or not at all and it requires a certain strength of persistence or plain pigheadedness to continue making work only to watch it disappear into a silent void. Partly the problem is that the demand for criticism is too great for the number of critics; too few are writing about too many, and the outlets for articles are limited. As a partial solution to this, various artists write their own critical, theoretical essays that appear in conjunction with their work as an avenue for publicity, to create a discourse of their concerns, and to increase the visibility to a wider audience. Australian dancers are only just beginning to take this up as an option.

Dance that I enjoy watching, talking about, writing about is that in which I perceive the mental, private world of the dancer being lived through and in, his or her body.

Changing issues in aesthetics and dance making have left many critics outmoded in their approach to new work. They ask inappropriate questions, make indignant moral denunciations that reveal their lack of knowledge and more importantly, lack of desire to foster the development of the art form, or talk about everything else but the dance.

Many dancers believe that what has value is the 'work'.

But what gets seen, what is selected and legitimised is mainly out of control of the artist. The businessman, the critic, the entrepreneur sells the work and decides taste. Reviewing is a way of making work visible and giving it value and status as a commodity to the general public.

How do we measure the success and status of a work? By the number of people who see it, a review, funding from federal or state bodies, other artists comments?

Language functions to define power, to construct and maintain belief systems and stability, to exclude alternative modes which might threaten, and to decide what goals are possible.

Dancers are not encouraged to speak about their work or question the basis on which it is made. The fallacy being that the talking about it somehow detracts from the work itself. Tertiary institutions have not dealt adequately with this need for informed critical analysis, often placing emphasis on the acquisition of physical technique at the expense of intellection.

As dancers we need to have more say in what gets shown, discussed and taught about dance. Why, for example, show Michael Clark and not Trisha Brown? Is dance undergoing recognition as a theoretical practice? Is this theory to legitimise its place in the arts and/or society?

Postmodern dance does exist in Australia. The problem is that it goes virtually unseen and isolated from the wider issues of cultural debate and few write about it. Dance needs to be included in the current theoretical discourse of art practice, bringing its own unique perception to the changes that are taking place.

Oskar Schlemmer
The Baltimore Museum
of Art.

Are the lines between dance, theatre and performance art blurring into one form of live performance? Schlemmer's notion of 'theatrical dance' "a meeting place for thought, the human form, space, time, light and energy and a considered placing of these elements in a precise relationship to one another."

For the criticism of postmodern dance it is no longer an issue of what is right or wrong, good or bad, but that work is questioned as to what it is trying to do. Postmodernism has dispensed with the idea of originality and invites dialogue.

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SALLY GARDNER

REFLECTIONS ON
THE STATE
OF THE ART:

A REPORT ON THE SMALL COMPANIES
CONFERENCE,¹ JANUARY 1987

There is no doubt that dance holds a marginal place in Australian culture. There must be few places in the world where the body as a site of meaning is so narrowly circumscribed in the dominant culture as it is here by its roles either as vehicle for sporting prowess or as sex object. The ways in which the body is most often represented in this culture give little indication of the possibility of a practice that might embody intelligence, physical skill, sensitivity, co-operation and the acknowledgement of a sensuality that has nothing to do with stereotyped sexuality or sexiness.

Dance shares the characteristic of marginality² with our national minorities and the insights gained by these groups into their own dilemmas may be of some benefit to dancers. 'Ethnic' minorities are patronised by the dominant culture which permits them to exist only in so far as they enhance or support it.³ The idea of 'multiculturalism' for example, is a myth that seeks to obscure a reality in which "the centre sees the periphery... as immature, disorganised and childish"⁴ The same analysis could apply to the position of modern dance in this country, with the important difference that, to a large extent, modern dance has actually succumbed to, or opted for, those restricted and frivolous qualities assigned to it.

The Contemporary Dance Companies Conference took place in January this year. It was an 8 day event bringing together members of a dozen modern dance groups from throughout Australia and New Zealand along with other individuals such as invited speakers and representatives of funding organizations, Actors' Equity and the Australian Association of Dance Education (AADE).

The conference was the outcome of a previous artistic directors' meeting which had been convened around issues of shared concern such as dance training, the allocation of financial support to dance, lack of sufficient representation on the Australia Council and co-ordination of touring schedules. It was funded by the Theatre Board and supported by the Australian Bicentennial Authority as the first stage in a proposed bicentennial project. It was specifically intended to address the need for communication to take place between all company members, not just the artistic directors.

The conference was structured around morning classes and workshops offered mainly by company members and afternoon and evening forums at which invited speakers talked on a variety of matters relating to the practice and politics of dance. In addition there were several discussions and workshops which sought to find a starting point for the proposed bicentennial project, loosely envisaged as involving collaborations between companies. Finally there were informal showings, live or on video, by each company of works in progress or of parts of completed works.

The conference was set up in a spirit of both generosity and concern for the future. Sadly, its promise was not fulfilled. Many of the fundamental problems inherent in the practice of dance in Australia were neither recognised nor addressed — partly because participants failed to take advantage of the opportunity and partly because the origins and the structure of the conference frustrated a genuine interrogation. The depth of discussion that took place was limited for several reasons. Firstly, the tradition from which the conference emerged was one in which people had been getting together and talking about issues of funding and administration rather than about issues of the theory and practice of dance itself. Secondly, the involvement of the Bicentennial Authority and the presence of its Arts and Entertainment co-ordinator acted as an incentive on groups to present a united front; at stake were substantial grants of money for 1988 and visibility for the art form at a crucial time. There was much talk about the desirability of a noncompetitive atmosphere. In practice, however, this meant that tensions and differences were effectively prohibited from being used creatively as a source of useful debate. Nonetheless, the event provided a kind of viewing platform from which certain problems could clearly be seen: problems that may not have been widely acknowledged while the groups remained in their characteristic isolation.

The companies brought together by the conference represent the main part of what is considered 'modern dance' (see below) in this country. (Sydney Dance Company and the former Australian Dance Theatre under Jonathan Taylor are strictly speaking 'modern ballet' companies.) Those present at the conference also represent the modern dance activity that takes the lion's share of public funding allocated for such purposes and which thereby receives a particular kind of validity. If the dance that was seen at the conference represents the major part of modern dance in Australia at this time⁵ then the conference itself provided a unique occasion for assessing just what that dance is.

1. Also called 'A coming together of modern dance', 'Contemporary Dance Companies Workshop'. See also official report and report in *Dance Australia* Issue 27, April 1987.

2. Not in the sense of being outside society but rather of 'being oppressed within it' as explained in Paulo Freire's *Cultural Action for Freedom* (Penguin Education, UK, 1972).

3. 'As long as the dominant culture's categories are backed by political, economic and technological power other expressive ventures will only be tolerated as an alternative form of diversion. The periphery becomes packaged as the entertainment fringe.' Nikos Papastergiadis, "Culture, Self and Plurality", in *Arena* 76 (Aust. 1986); p 54.

4. *Ibid.* p 54.

5. Other modern dance occurs through the work of independent small group & solo artists who may from time to time apply for and receive project funding.

STRUCTURES

Within the centuries, from the fourteenth to the sixteenth, the courts had banished the jongleurs, the voice of the people, and no longer listened to anything but scored music performed by salaried musicians. Power had taken hold, becoming hierarchical and distant. A shift in vocabulary confirms this mutation: the term *jongleur* was no longer used to designate a musician, but rather *ménéstrel* ("minstrel") or *ménéstrier* (also "minstrel") from the Latin *ministerialis*, "functionary". JACQUES ATTALI.⁶

If most modern dance in Australia takes place within the 'small company' then an investigation of what is contained within that term would be crucial to an understanding of how the art form is developing. However, the reasons behind the existence of the small company structure and the precise meaning of the label were taken for granted at the conference rather than having been posed as questions which would have made an ideal starting point for discussion. The omission from the agenda of such questions points to an ever more pressing problem for modern dance in Australia: the lack of documentation and historical work from which we might develop an understanding of our own history within the broader context of the modern dance tradition — historically an American tradition⁷ carried on by individual dance artists, the majority of whom were women.

The Australian small dance company is a structure that exists in various manifestations. At a superficial level it is possible to generalise only to a limited extent. Differences in origin or emphasis exist such that some groups like Tasmanian Dance Company and 2 Dance Plus in Perth have, primarily, a dance-in-education focus; others like Dance North in Queensland and Feats Unlimited in Darwin serve a 'remote' area; and companies such as Human Veins, One Extra and Dance Works are the result of a choreographer/artistic director having found a niche in a particular location.

In common with one another, however, all these groups receive revenue funding, if not for the whole year at least for the major part of it. With this financial support comes a considerable amount of power on the part of support agencies — State Governments and The Australia Council — to determine that companies shall fulfill certain functions. The competitive nature of state politics, prevailing ideas about the need for equal distribution of resources on a geographic basis and a particular understanding by government and support agencies of the concepts of community accessibility and accountability all work to severely limit the way in which dance is practised in this country; and small dance companies are required to have a function that can be clearly and almost exclusively articulated in these terms.

If we accept that the above is the case and are concerned about the development of a vital modern dance practice in Australia then the relationship of the small company structure to the kind of work made within it warrants investigation. During the conference companies showed some of their work informally. This made it possible to get some idea of the nature of each company's work and also of the ways in which that work is made and performed. From this somewhat limited experience it appeared that dance was being understood primarily as a support for a dramatic or narrative theme; or it occurred as a representational device such as when dancers represented Australian flora and fauna in one of the works shown. In this way dance appeared to have only a functional role to play in the working through of an idea that belonged essentially to another medium. With some notable exceptions the exploration of dance as an autonomous medium with its own imperatives and firmly grounded in an understanding of the human body as its vehicle was absent. Thus, in most of the work, over eighty years of modern dance history went unacknowledged. Isadora Duncan, at the turn of the century was, after all, uncovering 'the power of movement to generate its own forms'.⁸

6. Jacques Attali, *Noise. The Political Economy of Music* (Manchester UP, 1985); p 15.

7. With roots also in Germany and such figures as Mary Wigman.

8. John Martin, *Introduction to the Dance* (Dance Horizons, 1965); p 226.

The genuinely exploratory processes essential to the development of an art form were not much in evidence at the conference and it is possible that the functional role of dance in the work shown is closely connected to and reflects the 'functional' nature of the companies themselves. In the visual arts an artist may simply be an artist and his or her work will be self-defining. In dance, however, it appears that the work must always be defined in relation to something else: the dance is telling a story, the dancer is in a company, and the company does work in schools, for example. This is not to say that the objectives of dance-in-education or of ensuring that people who live a long way from cultural centres have access to art and theatre are not valid and important. What is disturbing, however, is that the intellectual and conceptual constraints imposed on dance by the structures that have evolved to serve these functions are inhibiting its development as an art form. Moreover, in the absence of an articulated historical and theoretical context for both the making and reception of dance in Australia the work made within the small company structure is assumed by many actually to constitute modern dance.

While sharing common relationships to their sources of financial support small companies also share certain forms of internal organisation. This became clear at the conference during the discussions amongst dancers about their daily working situations, their relationships to artistic directors etc. These discussions were prompted by the need to respond to the Actors' Equity representative presently involved in writing a new regional dance companies' award. It became clear that the small dance company challenges neither the hierarchical principles of the traditional ballet company nor its philosophical basis. Small companies in fact reproduce the sorts of relationships that exist in the dance institutions from which many of their dancers come. In these institutions a kind of 'banking' principle operates where the student or dancer is fed a certain number of classes or dance pieces over a period of time in the belief that quantity will eventually come to equal quality. The student or dancer is a passive recipient who is not supposed to question the meaning of what is being deposited with him or her. The competence of the dancer is seen in terms of a narrowly defined set of physical skills and, indeed, this is often all that is required by the type of work in which the dancer performs. The main response of the dancer to the sense of frustration created by this situation is to move on to another small company where there may at least be a change of scenery.

* * *

SILENCES

If learning to read and write is to constitute an act of knowing, the learners must assume from the beginning the role of creative subjects. It is not a matter of memorizing and repeating given syllables, words and phrases, but rather of reflecting critically on the process of reading and writing itself, and on the profound significance of language. In so far as language is impossible without thought, and language and thought are impossible without the world to which they refer, the human word is more than mere vocabulary — it is word-and-action.

PAULO FREIRE.⁹

One of the informal showings at the conference took place in the form of an open rehearsal. The choreographer had the dancers perform a section of the work that had been more or less completed. He then spent some time working with the dancers, giving them verbal suggestions and demonstrating how they might execute the movements more as he wanted them. If, after this period of rehearsal, we had been able to see the section performed again we may have been able to see that the movements had changed because the dancers were now thinking about them differently. Unfortunately, however, we were not given that opportunity as the presentation moved on abruptly to another work.

During a forum entitled 'Dance in the Community' one speaker who had been invited to talk on her work in Aboriginal communities appeared quite deeply moved by her experiences in that area.

9. Paulo Freire, *Cultural Action for Freedom* (Penguin, UK, 1972); p 29.

In the absence of a prepared paper however she was unable to articulate any of the issues or experiences that lay behind her strong feelings. Questions from the floor also failed to elicit any substantive comments and this engendered a sense of powerlessness in those present.

These two incidents, which were not isolated ones, illustrate the general problem that exists for dancers in Australia in having no shared theoretical basis or language through which an interrogation of our practice might take place. Without a theoretical framework, as one artist has pointed out, it is impossible to judge success or failure and impossible to set goals. 'Instead "everybody knows what they mean" although nobody has the language to express it and being unable to express it they have no way of finding out if it does in fact make sense'.¹⁰

The contributions of speakers at the forums fell clearly into two groups: those by people involved primarily in dance, and those by people who had been invited because they represented an outside perspective. These latter included visual artists, musicians, directors and a lawyer among others. The sharp contrast between the forms of expression of these two groups was remarkable. The one mode of expression was characterised by strong feelings and the personal narrative, ways of communicating that make it difficult for an interlocutor to address an issue or idea because discussion always remains very personal or is interpreted in that way. The other involved extracting content out of life experience and presenting it in the form of ideas for analysis or discussion in an acknowledgement that thinking and articulating clearly is vital and necessary, if difficult, work.

The question of developing a theoretical language for talking about dance, which could have formed the basis of all discussions at the conference, was taken up separately in a forum entitled 'Towards a language for dance and the development of a critical perspective'. In this forum three members of the Writings on Dance Collective gave a presentation that communicated with the audience, simultaneously, through a number of different modes of discourse: speech, gesture, costume, quotation, dance and manifesto. In this way dance was revealed as a practice relevant to and in dialogue with such other practices as social theory, philosophy, religion and sexual politics. Here, dance was acknowledged as cultural production, taking place within the context of a wider social discourse; as such it was shown to be an activity that arises out of and can feed back into the wider discourse, producing not only pleasure but also knowledge.

* * *

With forums such as the one mentioned above the conference began to find a cutting edge. Other forums had a directly consciousness-raising function such as the one on the proposed restructuring of the Australia Council. Many dancers encountered new and challenging approaches to dance in the workshops; and discussions amongst dancers about the new regional dance companies' award encouraged reflection on the structures within which they were working and on the ways in which their views on dance were being shaped. Dancers also saw their artistic directors in moments of vulnerability and this may also have contributed to an unsettling of the status quo in some of the groups. Above all the conference brought groups out of the isolation in which they habitually work and this in itself may prove to have been an important first step in creating useful dialogue.

* * *

The Contemporary Dance Companies Conference revealed something of the complex network of forces acting on the field of modern dance in Australia. These forces need to be recognised and understood if any meaning is to be drawn from them and any course for the future to be charted.

10. Owen Kelly, *Community, Art and the State* (Comedia, London, 1984); p 3.

The conference took place out of a need for people to overcome their artistic and geographical isolation and to come together to discuss issues of mutual concern. Its very existence involved an implicit acknowledgement that members of small dance companies constitute a minority group and that, like other minorities, they feel compelled to demonstrate solidarity in order to avoid being further oppressed or disadvantaged. This solidarity, however, must be built on clear aims and a clear articulation of what it is the group is seeking to protect; it cannot be built on the imaginary resolution of real contradictions. A shared language must be developed so that issues and differences can be continually interrogated and discussed. A history must be written so that lessons can be learned and processes understood — not only by the dancers of today but also by those to come.

* * *

HELLEN SKY

PHOTODOCUMENTATION



In 1986 Deborah Hay visited Australia. During her three month residency she toured major cities performing and conducting workshops. While in Melbourne she choreographed a movement play Milk of the Cipher with eight independent dancers and thirty participants from the three week intensive workshop. It was performed at the Studio of the Performing Arts Centre in December 1986, along with her solo piece The Well.



*Being in this one body,
moving at this time, for this instant,*

next to the next instant,



next to the next instant . . .



PHOTO: HELLEN SKY

PHOTO: HELLENSKY



*You see the
qualities of
being without
having to bring
it into the
emotional or
psychological
realm*



PHOTO: HELLENSKY

*They appeared like a tapestry,
waving, falling, rolling, leaning,
bouncing off each other*



PHOTO: HELLENSKY

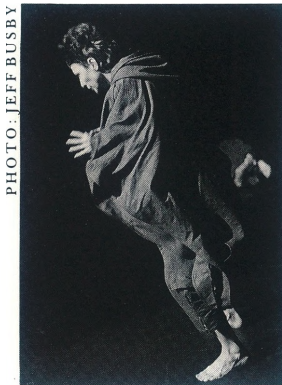


PHOTO: JEFF BUSBY

*Cellularly listening to the dance,
performing it and letting go
simultaneously: trying to bring these
three acts together*

*"The art of this text is the air that
it circulates among its partitions.*

*The links are invisible, all appears improvised or juxtaposed,
it induces by agglutinating rather than by demonstrating,
by placing things side by side
or by prying them apart."*

JACQUES DERRIDA

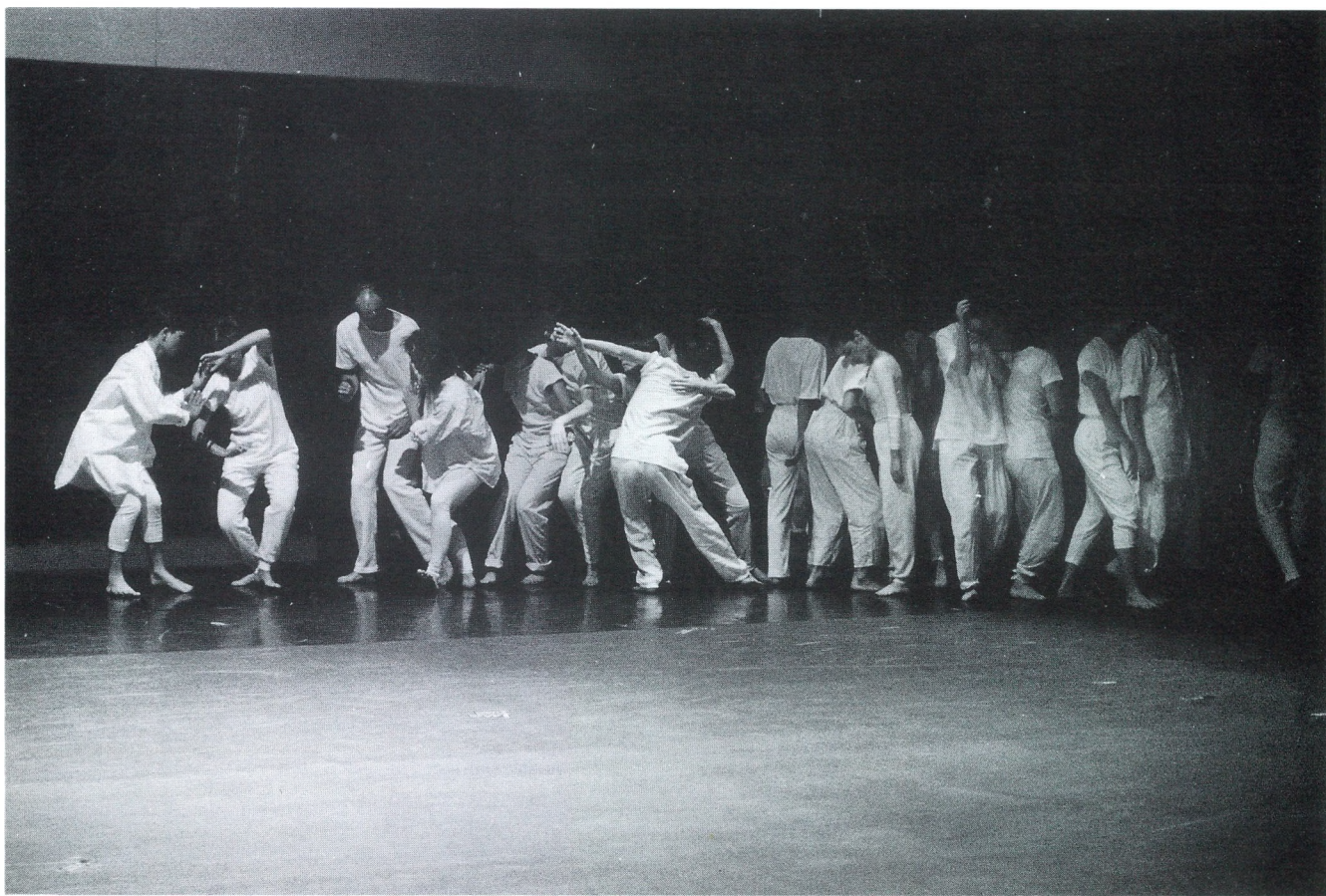


PHOTO: JEFF BUSBY

PHOTO: JEFF BUSBY

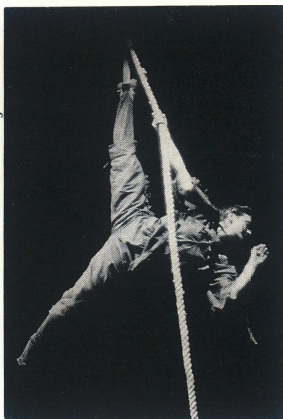


PHOTO: JEFF BUSBY

Performance is awakened attention.

It is the same for the audience and performer.

The entire body becomes the perceiver.

SYLVIA STAEHLI

CIRCLE THE EARTH

BY ANNA HALPRIN

A RITUAL OF THE SPIRIT OF PEACE

for ten hours a day for five days, one hundred and fifty people came together,



PHOTO: HELLENSKY

from all over . . . to dance

We go intertwined, him and you
and me, her and him, you and her,
each the center of our own circle
of attraction and compulsion and gravity.
What a constellation we make: I call it
the Matrix. I call it the dancing
family. I call it wheels inside wheels.
No one is at the center, but each
is her own center, no one controls
the jangling swing and bounce and merry-

go-round lurching intertangle of this mobile.
We pass through each other trembling
and we pass through each other shrieking
and we pass through each other shimmering.
The circle is neither unbroken
nor broken but living, a molecule attracting
atoms that wants to be a protein,
complex, mortal, able to sustain life,
able to reproduce itself inexactly,
learn and grow!

jumped and laughed
leapt, swayed and swaggered.
smiles — miles of smiling eyes
skipping in lines; around and around
Curves swooping, swinging, swirling
stamping, Clapping

clasping, hands, holding
motion. Rising
Energy. panting feet, folding
roll. Calling out,
circling.

Spirit originally means wind.

can you imagine not having to lie? to try to tell what you feel and want till sometimes



PHOTO: HELLENSKY

you can see each other clear and strange as a photograph of your hand.

Two people can keep each other
sane, can give support, conviction,
love, massage, hope, sex.
Three people are a delegation,
a committee, a wedge. With four
you can play bridge and start
an organization. With six
you can rent a whole house,
eat pie for dinner with no
seconds, and hold a fund raising party.

A dozen make a demonstration.
A hundred fill a hall.
A thousand have solidarity and your own newsletter;
It goes on one at a time,
it starts when you care
to act, it starts when you do
it again after they said no,
it starts when you say We
and know who you mean, and each
day you mean one more.²

Having affirmed our strength in the Vortex dance, we are ready for the next step; an arduous journey into the dark side of human emotion, ready to evoke and confront the killer, the war-maker that lives within each of us.

PHOTO: HELLENSKY



To the body and mind which have been cramped by noxious work or company, nature is medicinal and restores their tone . . . The health of the eye seems to demand a horizon . . . we are never tired so long as we can see far enough.

RALPH WALDO EMERSON *NATURE*

Then we ran. For the waters, trees and animals
the air and the children, grandparents
For our ancestors, the earth, for Eric,
for the extinct Great Grey Brolga.
For aborigines,
for community.

For our mothers and fathers
the birds, the sun, for ourselves and each other
We ran for tomorrow; I wanted
to run for ever.

A strong woman is a woman who loves strongly and weeps strongly and is strongly terrified and has strong needs. A strong woman is strong in words, in action, in connection, in feeling;



Who looks upon a river, in a meditative hour, and is not reminded of the flux of all things.

RALPH WALDO EMERSON

PHOTO: HELLENSKY

Strength is not in her, but she enacts it as the wind fills a sail.³

1. From "A New Constellation"

2. From "The Low Road"

3. From "For Strong Women"

Extracts from Marge Piercy, *The Moon Is Always Female*, Alfred A. Knopf Publisher, N.Y., 1982.

REVIEWS

SHARE, SIGHT, SCENERY

Choreographed by John McLaughlin. The Tasmanian Dance Company, Atheneum II, October 1986.

Overall, I found it difficult to settle into John McLaughlin's piece because the dancing, which was rigorously demanding, didn't seem to sit comfortably on many of the dancers.

Neil, Martin and Felicity seemed to be the most integrated in their performance of complex dance material which drew on a wide range of movement sources. It was their integration of body, mind and feeling that enabled me to become engaged in the dancing because I could sense each dancer's deep, body-felt connection with their material. I valued the way they were able to transmit the physicality of their felt movement directly to the kinesthetic senses of the audience.

Specifically, I appreciated the commitment, daring and seriousness of Neil's performance: something about his intensity of focus was really engaging. I enjoyed the maturity and diversity of Felicity's dancing... she was equally convincing in solo improvisation with the musician Stephen as she was in the more specific technical patterning of the ensemble dancing. It's the transmitted sense of confidence, of fully grounded presence in the material that I also valued in Martin's performance, especially the dramatic dialogue on juggling. It certainly gave me an opportunity to appreciate the maturity required from dancers who are going to be able to integrate and communicate a series of complex dance ideas.

What of the dance itself? It was iconoclastic, unpredictable, challenging, fun, also tiresome at times, too long... certainly ambitious.

I most enjoyed the variety of music and dance relationships formed by having the dancers and musicians interact with each other out of 'role'. I found the musicians were consistent personae: during their playing and acting they appeared whole, 3 dimensional and fully-rounded throughout. It seemed to me that the dancers had to make more difficult transitions from long, abstract, technical passages to more relaxed interaction on a human level with the musicians. I found these transitions less satisfying, as often the human connections were not found.

Nevertheless, it made me reflect upon practitioners of the two different media and the differences between playing an instrument outside the body and living within an instrument which is the embodiment of the person as well as the dancer. Why do dancers have more trouble moving from 'playing' their instrument to 'being' themselves? Is there any other kind of dance experience or training which integrates both the dancer-performer and the dancer-person so that they can remain more integrated?

Perhaps John McLaughlin intended the audience to grapple with these or similar questions. Perhaps they were a by-product of my viewpoint on dance. Whatever the answer, McLaughlin requires his audience to be active, continually responding to changes of media and viewpoint. It was certainly a rousing and exploratory piece.

LINDA LEAH

*

Australians are well known to give things a go or, put more colourfully, they'll always have a bash. John McLaughlin, who's an American, has made a dance with plenty of bash in it and the Tasmanian dancers and musicians will probably get better at giving it a go when they have a few more performances behind them. McLaughlin's piece has that good natured messiness about it that often happens when people put enough energy into something for it to go wrong.

The musicians, Stephen Leek and Gill Chapman, begin with pretensions to the concert hall but soon wind up all over the stage: they either get caught up in the dance action or willfully intrude on it, playing their way through buckets of water, toy piano, accordion and assorted drums as well as their respective cello and clarinet.

The dancing is quirky with lots of quick isolations contrasting big widespread movements and fast changes of plane and direction. Watching it is a bit like the experience of a bumpy ride.

Both the audience and the performers are constantly being disoriented or having their vision tested in some way. Felicity MacDonald undergoes an eye test, Martin Hughes is first lowered upside down carrying a pair of binoculars and then tries to juggle look-

ing past the balls to the audience (something he can manage only momentarily), Neil Adams dances a solo reminiscent of a magician's palming act or sleight of hand and we have to make sense of what is going on.

SALLY GARDNER

* * *

SIGHT AND VISION

Shelley Lasica at ACCA, April 1987.

I was lying in the bath — I thought — I do want to write about dance — but not as a forum in which I have to get it right — I have enough of those experiences in my life — but as a forum for expansion, of playful positing. I am not interested in words as traps whereby you show your adequacy or inadequacy to the world — rather as carefree jottings. There is of course much which stops the written word from being a carefree jotting, its relative permanency for one. But in a spirit of impermanency, of onward moving dialogue...

Shelley

Placed with care

Body parts placed

The arm and hands, one extended up — fingers closed hand moving back and out slightly on still raised arm, tentatively reaching for... other held across the front of the body at waist height placed firmly but curved-contrast between the arc of the arm suggesting grace and the stillness, stiffness, heldness of position. The raised arm with its hand making slight movements, is it reaching for its position — or is it reaching for a missing face to recognize or caress — reaching for or through a substance...? The face of Shelley is still — attentive?, sensing?, waiting? I cannot connect with where her consciousness is inside the moving and the stillness.

Sometimes the eyes close as when leaning into a fall to catch herself in a little repeated jump/hold. Her eyes almost close to concentrate on letting the body fall through space. This is one of the moments when I feel that I recognize what she is experiencing/doing — the weight of the body falls through space and is caught — a game of dare.

The catch into sudden jump — legs bent — into hold — this I could interpret as dynamic play, sending the energy through, riding on its crest and teasing with the sudden holds — but that is what I would be doing inside those movements not I think what Shelley is

doing. The placement of the parts is too much to the fore for the focus to be on the energy that passes through.

She likes her limbs. Charcoal grey soft bermuda shorts and flared swinging top with some sleeve. The whiteness of the skin of legs, arms and face are highlighted. The costume is chosen to focus our eye on them. Certain motifs move through and repeat first facing one bank of audience then facing the other. She is performing between two banks of audience that face each other, a transverse stage. She shares her face and her back. The piece ends abruptly — she looks up as if to say it's over and leaves. I am outside wondering about *Sight and Vision* — she was definitely offering herself for sight — dancing in this context — a festival of performance art seems very bare and intense. Vision? I continue to wonder what inner vision was Shelley tuned to as she danced.

SUSIE FRASER

* * *

DANCES OF WAR AND PEACE

CIRCLE THE EARTH. *Anna Halprin. Jan 11 '87. Melb. Town Hall.*

"ABOUT TODAY". *Chris Babinskas. April 25. '87. Danceworks Studio.*

BIG SISTER SAYS: "RUN FOR PEACE"

Circle the Earth was not widely advertised and the hundreds of people who arrived to witness the event came there mainly through word of mouth. Some came curious, some came in support of friends who were performing, and some came with an aspiration "to participate in the creation of a unified vision of peace."¹

Anna Halprin introduced *Circle the Earth* as a dance of peace, a ritual, in which both performers and spectators might be deeply engaged. We were directed to enter the event in a spirit of participation, to feel ourselves implicated in its action and subject to its logic. Some one was dancing for each one of us, and the roles and terms associated with dance and theatre performance were not appropriate. We should leave the critic at the door and go in alone.

But this was an occasion rich with paradox. Contradictory behaviours and messages accumulated throughout the performance, and I, for one, found

1. See the Australian Association for Dance Education July '86 newsletter for outline of the *Circle the Earth* project.

it difficult to maintain a sense of participation and involvement in it.

Defined as "ritual", it was an experience to be lived through, but it was also an event that had been clearly "designed to be looked at", an event that was fully cognizant of theatrical convention. The piece/ritual was orientated frontally, its modes of address were highly theatrical, moving between the rhetorical and the confessional, and its dynamic structure, with its repeating cycles of arousal, climax, detumescence/denouement, and rehabilitation, was consistent with traditional dramatic form. There was a tension existing throughout, between actualization and presentation, between ritual enactment and theatrical depiction, between "doing" and "showing"; and this tension gave rise to certain confusions for the would-be participant viewer. It was suggested that we should engage with the performance as participants and witnesses, but another position was also presumed — that of spectator who was to be shown and taught things (truths?) This "desire to instruct", initially revealed in Anna's introduction, and restated in various ways throughout the performance, became a significant element in the structuring of interaction between performers and audience. If members of the audience did come, as requested, with a sense of open exploration and with a willingness to experience, they were met with an event which at time denied such openness, in that it bore resemblance to a quite prescriptive style of agit-prop, evangelical theatre.

Rhetoric surrounding the event suggested a space of freedom, of open communion, of action informed by personal commitment. However the uniformity which members of the performing group demanded of each other implied a degree of coercion, and suppression of difference, which would seem to be inconsistent with the spirit and intention of the occasion. Uniformity was imposed gesturally — should the arms be outstretched towards the dawn at waist, chest, or eye level? and there was one right answer; and ideologically — running for natural things like trees, sparkling streams and whales was okay; running for politicians, farmers, alcoholics and other persons or things in need of some support, compassion or transformation, seemed not to be okay. Despite a statement from Anna that this was the section of the ritual when individuals ran for the things they cared deeply for on this earth, making a personal commitment in that moment, some deeply felt personal dedications were more acceptable than others.

Culturally specific images, some drawn from American Indian life, were evoked in the name of a

somewhat simplistic universalism.

The use of the American eagle (a tail feather of which accompanies Anna and the *Circle the Earth* ritual on their global travels) as a symbol of peace was problematic, given that in the Australian context the eagle is more likely to symbolize American imperialism and that nation's will to power, than it is conservationist and pacifist aspirations. Touches of local colour — burning gum leaves and the much appropriated music of the didgeridu, did not diminish, but rather heightened the apprehension that what one was witnessing was the imposition of an individual, culturally and socially specific, vision, and not the actualization of a collective aspiration.

A ritual may be enacted to effect some transformation or catharsis, to bring about a resolution of conflict, and to restore social order and harmonious relations between people. By the same token, a ritual may be a mechanism of social control, a means by which a particular ideology is prescribed and reinforced; consensus may be achieved by the suppression of difference. The ritual act imposes a degree of conformity, however mild, upon its community of participants, since shared experience, shared assumptions and expectations must exist if the ritual is to proceed and effect some change. If as participant viewer or performer you were in agreement with the point of view embodied in this peace ritual, the occasion would have been a moving and significant one, which is clearly was for many people. If, however, you were defined differently, and were unwilling or unable to accept without question the ideological and aesthetic position of the event (since it was a theatrical, as well as a ritual occasion) you were inevitably positioned outside its effect and its benefit. To this outsider, Anna's welcoming chat in which she gave guidance as to how we should perceive the event, seems, in retrospect, an exercise in control: Anna as conductor, extremely skillfully and with considerable charm, orchestrating the behaviour of hundreds of people. A little chilling that; and towards the end of the hour and three-quarter long event, when Big Sister said: "Sing for peace", I ran for cover.

Postscript:

I have taken care not to review *Circle the Earth* as theatre/dance performance, and if I had done so my observations would be considerably more positive as there were many memorable, visually arresting, and indeed beautiful configurations and patterns of activity throughout — (eg. the audience's entrance through eucalypt arches and through a field of sleep-

ing and arrested bodies; the lines of advancing masked figures which the audience watched through its own improvised masks; and the patterns of running and still figures in the running for the earth section). What I am taking issue with is the assumption that an event, once named as ritual, is beyond interrogation and criticism. The rhetoric which surrounded *Circle the Earth*, and the manner of its representation to the audience by Anna Halprin effectively placed a taboo on questioning, questioning become synonymous with hostility, or with an inability or unwillingness on the part of the questioner to understand the nature of the occasion. It is the political dimension of this ostensibly apolitical event which interests me, and which I wish to question; the reader in turn might in their reading wish to expose and interrogate the political agenda implicit in this critique.

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"About today" is not a title but a naming of a process and of an intention. Chris Babinskas adopted this phrase during preparation for a performance which was, like the phrase itself, succinct, resonant, and only apparently simple.

The "today" of the dance was April 25, Anzac Day, and the performance created an opportunity for



PHOTO: HELLENSKY



PHOTO: HELLENSKY

performer and audience alike to meditate upon large questions of war, of nationalism, of death and dying. There was nothing to suggest that this was to be an occasion of significance; no instructions, no maps were proffered. We had been watching some dances in an informal showing and this was the last on the programme. However as the dance proceeded one was drawn in to its centre, in to the person, the desire which powered it, and in to an understanding of why at this particular moment this work and this testimony was necessary.

The dance began with a story of the people of the Andaman Islands, of their dances and songs growing out of their lives. When the occasion is right, so the story goes, the islander presents his song and dance. If it is well received he retains it, if not he lets it go. Chris Babinskas' Anzac Day performance was presented in a similar spirit; it was a dance which emerged in the doing, the questions and understandings it embodied defining themselves in the moment of performance.

The performer's presence was an inquiring, not an assertive one, and she presented not fixed but shifting positions in relation to her chosen materials. She inhabited the place of both soldier and citizen, of killer and victim, of mourner and mourned. Objects and activities were in themselves simple, but this apparent simplicity was deceptive. The objects used — bucket, shovel, gas mask, flowers, were not only themselves — banal, concrete, and functional, but also suggestive of other, more ambiguous realities.

A gas mask worn in conjunction with army khaki, is, one might think, a relatively unambiguous object; but when that gas mask emits a high-pitched whistling

song, and covers the face of a turning, stopping starting dancing woman, its meanings and its significations shift and multiply. And what of the shovel carried into the space and then neglected; what was its purpose? For burying bodies, memories, old wounds, or for digging them up?

An ominous-cum-comic figure in a gas mask gave way to a woman running for cover from dive-bombing planes. When the bombing ceased she stood waiting, face to the wall, whilst somewhere women were wailing. A quietly and precisely drawn dance was accompanied by a languid "Hawaiian style" rendition of the Disney Mousketeer song, and in a final, elegiac and yet still ambiguous gesture, dead flowers were offered to members of the audience. Something had moved on, some transformation of experience had occurred in the performer. It was a gesture of recognition, of reconciliation, of dedication and of farewell.

This dance crossed national boundaries, alluding to

European, Pacific, American and Australian experience. It dealt with highly charged materials with emotion, but without sentimentality. A performer aligning herself acutely to the forces at play on a particular day, in a particular moment, might harness the power of a collective remembering. In this alignment the possibility of some transformation of experience comes into being; the performer is a medium through which reflection, reconstruction and reconciliation proceeds. Something of all this was present in Chris Babinskas' Anzac Day performance. The fact that it offered no one conclusion or resolution to the emotions it evoked or to the experiences it referenced, was appropriate given the scale and intricacy of the occasion which generated it. It was not "about war", or "about peace", but "about today", a today in which past and present were enfolded.

ELIZABETH DEMPSTER

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FORTHCOMING ISSUE: WRITINGS ON DANCE 3 POLITICS OF THE BODY SUMMER 1987/88

