

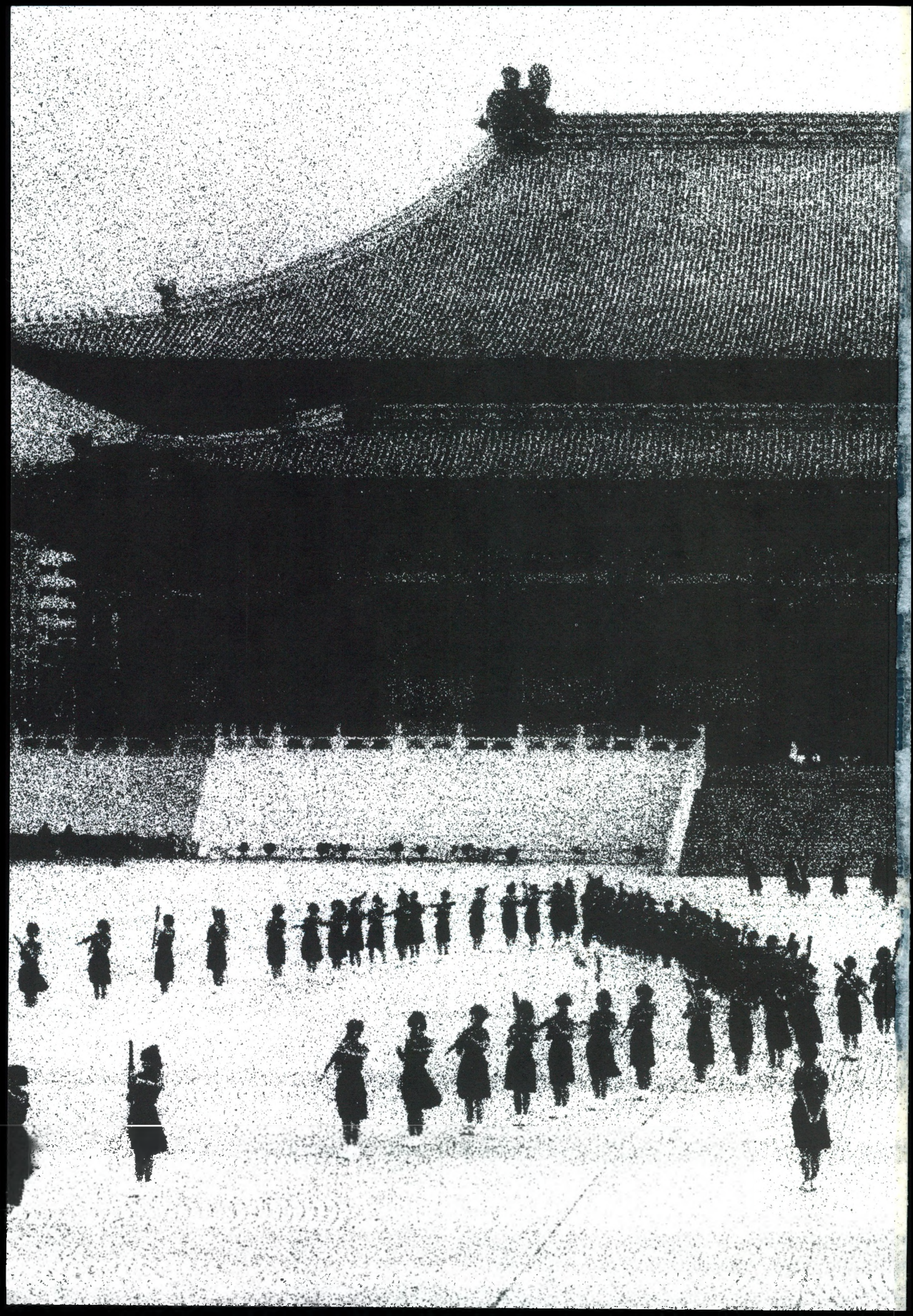
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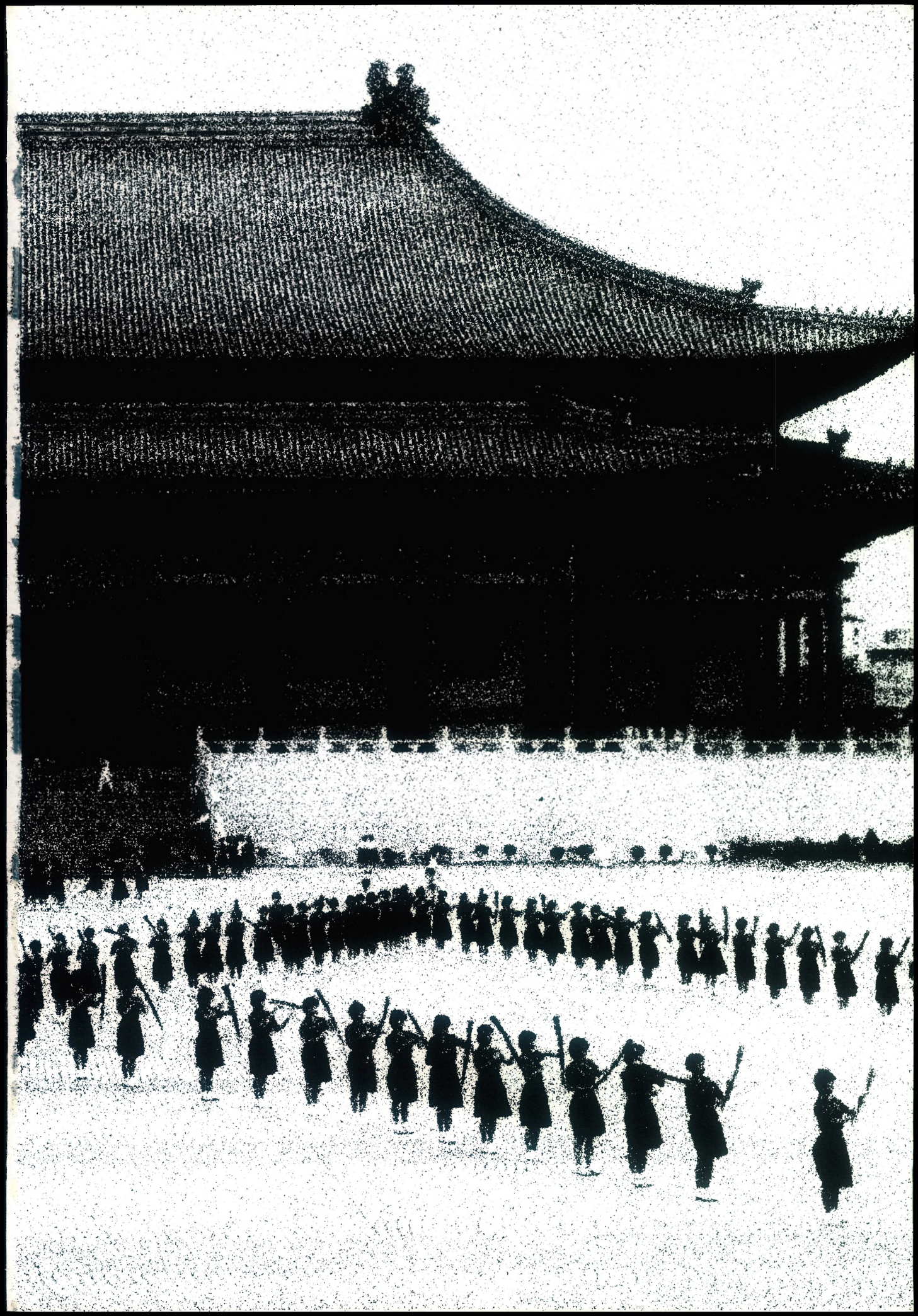
Writings
on *Dance*

Questions of Position

MANIFESTO • PAS DE DEUX • SPACES OF RESISTANCE

MARY FULKERSON • ELIZABETH DEMPSTER







Writings
on Dance

6

**Questions
of Position**

WRITINGS ON DANCE

6. QUESTIONS OF POSITION

EDITORIAL BOARD

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ENDPAPERS:

SCHOOLGIRLS OUTSIDE CULTURAL CENTRE IN TAIPEI, TAIWAN.

PHOTOGRAPHED BY HELLEN SKY.

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Preface

THIS VOLUME is a collection of statements, markers, pylons. Yet, as in performance, where meaning lies in neither marker, < dancer > nor < receiver >, so meaning lies in no one of these articles but rather in the creative space between, where the reader's mind spans the ideas.

This is the border-place of heterogeneity, argument, loose limbs. Its volatility is too much for those who believe stability, repetition, the choreographed are what matter. It crackles: confronts the hegemonies with the truth of their own mutability. That is why the hegemonies scream.

The desire for contact is what engenders language and form; yet points of contact which deny resonance are death. Language is death if it does not register a change in sensibility, if it does not trace shifted space.

Dance in particular suffers from a determined restriction of [writings on] the body. This journal has almost walked the plank for naming trouble-spots (nail them!), stating the family's disease. The poltergeists in this volume call the lie on *pas de deux*; question our checklist of responses to art; refute the holding of art to the ransom of 'purpose'; unpin performing bodies from the wall. The idea is not to debunk so much as to restore resonance. These writers turn and turn stones in order to leave no butterfly crucified.

Created from the idea of a thirteenth rib (as the writers following all were), I return to space; end this preface with an undoing, leave what follows to your eyes When all is printed and bound, you, and not these words, are what matter. We listen for your crackle, engagements, metamorphoses, fire.

Zsuzsanna Soboslay

OCTOBER 1990

FOLLOWING PAGES: LOUVRE, PARIS, FRANCE.

PHOTOGRAPH BY HELLEN SKY.





Manifesto

The role of art is to serve no purpose – which is not to say that art lacks purpose. The role art comes to play for a particular society at a particular moment should not be equated with the *intentions* of individual artists: the putative role of art is not necessarily the role of artists. Also, in seeing a relationship between the art and the society of a particular time we have to be careful not to proceed from this perception to a theory of cause and effect.

In the twentieth century art has had to keep shifting its position constantly so as to avoid having a role. Paradoxically, in the twentieth century there have also been times when it has been demanded of art that it serve as an agent for change. At these moments art's role has been defined as needing to reflect specific social conditions or ideals. At these times the debate about the function of art has been very intense.

Art speaks of experience beyond the scope of verbal language: only art can really speak about what it is and does. Art's role is not to be an agent for change. If it were it would have a function. And art ought not to have a function.

But is art political? The political in art lies in its refusal to be an instrument. Art speaks only for itself. However, this does not make it mere fantasy. Art is deeply committed to the world: it is definitely of the world. Its special character lies in its ways of being about the world – which are not the institutionalised ways.

Art stands in a complex relationship with the world. Understanding the way in which artists' experience of the world is translated into the form of art is very difficult and elusive. According to Adorno, who articulated a critical power in art, "the artist must feel the presence of the empirical other in the foreground of his own experience in order to be able to sublimate that experience, thus freeing himself from his confinement to content while at the same time saving the being-for-itself of art from slipping into outright indifference toward the world." ¹ But the "being-for-itself" of dance is tied to the body. It can never be indifferent, even when it wants to be.

What questions can we ask of art? That it be socially responsible? The whole project of modernism was to free art from empirical reality. But how can the art of the body be free of empirical reality? The whole project of 'post-modern' dance has been to establish a place in art for the mundane, everyday body: dance as the art of immanence.

When we think of art we might think of one or all of the following elements: an artist, an object or event, and a public which receives this object or event. But art is much more complex than this list of elements might indicate. The relations that exist between the elements are intensely mediated by all of the discourses around art that circulate in a given society. For example in the 'age of

mechanical reproduction' art images (visual, auditory and kinetic) pervade non-art contexts. This situation leads inevitably to the question "What is art?"

For the art of dance there are also other questions: for example, "How do we know when someone is dancing?" and "How do we know when we ourselves are dancing?" The answer to these questions will not be found in terms of kinds of movements but rather, in terms of the subject's (the dancer's) relationship to his or her moving. A person dancing is not necessarily creating a work of art.

Just as it is wrong to equate a generally accepted idea of the role of art with the intentions of individual artists it is equally misguided to equate an artist's intentions with the *meaning(s)* of his or her work. In postmodern theory the meaning of a work of art is not fixed but comes into being in the instances of its reception by an individual or group. This is the idea of the possibility for 'multiple readings.' This theory is related to current conceptions of 'subjectivity' or of 'the subject' ('I'). This concept of subjectivity involves the idea that the 'I' does not exist statically or definitively but is in a continual state of becoming; does not stand opposite the world which it (he or she) perceives but is embedded in and contingent upon it. The work of Cezanne was an early reflection of this realisation that "consciousness is subject to the same laws as nature." ² In the process of making art and in performance the distinction between self and world is shown to be a false one.

The art of dance subverts the notion of the unified, singular work of art. This is true in the sense that it is difficult to commodify a dance. (The process of commodification of

dance has manifested itself in the development of a cult of personalities.) It is also true in the sense that just as the dancing subject comes into existence in the act of dancing so too is the dance created in the moment of its performance. Conversely, it is questionable whether the dance exists outside of that moment. Today, the practice of some dance artists produces not a dance but rather recreates the process of discovery itself.

A society needs artists but cannot deliberately create, or legislate for, them. The process of the creation of artists cannot be institutionalised just as the process of the creation of a work of art cannot. All a society can do is refrain from suppressing the emergence of an artist.

Individual artists themselves must choose what they intend in their art. Their works may not be received accordingly but this is beside the point. For art as a whole to fulfill its function of having no function individual artists must be free to choose many different functions for their works.

Does the work of a particular artist have something to say about the works of other artists? According to postmodern theory all works of art speak to each other. But the answer is “no”, in the sense that no work of art can define another. For example, the particular technical skill on which the art of ballet is based cannot be used as a benchmark when considering the pedestrian activities of early ‘post-modern’ dance artists. This leads to the question of aesthetics.

Marcuse says that “the truth of art lies in its power to break the monopoly of established reality to *define* what is *real*.”³ Aesthetics, however, can very easily become an institu-

tion for defining what is 'real' art. But art is always ahead of language – so, insofar as in aesthetics we are talking about art, we are always talking about the past. An artist's concern is not with aesthetics, it is with art.

Even though an artist's concerns may appear to be solely with art this is not the case. Art issues are also social issues. For example if an artist says, "Here, I am concerned with making transitions between states of dancing and not dancing" he or she is addressing the question of the cultural interpretations of moving bodies.

Can all the arts be spoken of as one? It is reasonable to suggest that an art whose object is created in the same time and place as a person's body might be different at some fundamental level from an art whose object is elsewhere. We say that a dance is 'embodied.' This is the most basic relation between dance and the world.

In dance, the dancing subject is for the viewer what the art object is in the other arts. Dance is therefore in a position to call for a different relationship between art and audience.

The political in dance lies in its refusal to regard the body as an instrument.

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1. Adorno, T., *Aesthetic Theory*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London, 1984, p.9.
2. Berger, J., "Problems of Socialist Art" in *Radical Perspectives in the Arts*, ed. Lee Baxandall, Penguin, U.K., 1972, p.213.
3. Marcuse, H., *The Aesthetic Dimension*, Beacon Press, USA, 1978, p.9.

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Spaces of Resistance

When is it that an object loses its qualities of being separate from the body that fashioned it out of concept or plan? Perhaps when it reshapes the spine (ergonomically), or (through practice) retrains the hand that frets a cello (which, in turn, reshapes the brain), the object comes closest to being acknowledged as surrogate (hardly separate); *analogue* and enlargement (of the thought that moved arm that carved wood)...

The body which extends into air (clay, fountains, log fires), denies distinction between self and artefact – our prototype Rosetta stone, marked with our treatises and daemons, yet trapped by systems, codes of repetition, pattern,

[The orange-polishers in *Wogs Out Of Work* exhibit nationalistic ‘characteristics’ of gesture, deathly in uniformity as a line of mausolea, beneath which their selves sc/dr/eam]

control, in fear of letting flood into the conscious the *unconscious* in which we may drown.

(But at a cost, at what great cost...)

< The Theoretician, cushioned in his room, scorns this as a piece of Romance; sits insensate to the quibble in his spleen against Wordsworth, neck’s bicker with a(p)art(icle) of Foucault... >

Sea-change is rich, strange, but the most frightening of all (what *are* we once outline is dissolved? – weed where once was bone; pearling of eyes...); and hence it is with *great* vigilance we keep ourselves upright as ‘axial men’: *speaking* of being, caging the sea-mare’s brood...

Mad cartographers – Atlases who hold the blow-hole up against the surge, rope the moon; a madder *metaphysics* to consider analysis denying process, theory without body, hedging the mystery of waters into a toddler's pool...

For Heidegger, it is *feeling* which is

that basic mode of *Dasein* by force of which and in accordance with which we are always already lifted beyond ourselves into being as a whole.

Artaud demands that it is through the skin the metaphysical be made re-enter our minds. But with our dulled edges of skin, how can this be achieved?

• • • • •

S P A C E S O F R E S I S T A N C E

— trick or truth?

• • • • •

< They will say, "My, how his hair is growing thin!" >

Pinned, formulated, pushed up against the wall, our bodies are framed by statements of who we are, how we should move. < "What beautiful lips!" "Just like his father." "She'll be a knockout." > Once we pass the mirror stage (ie. out of the condition of *chora*, the prepredicative stage, where rhythm, intonation, and their dependence vis a vis the body's drives are observable through muscular contractions and the libidinal or sublimated cathexes that accompany vocalisation) and begin to experience the 'I' as something separate in the world, we become boundaried by linguistic frames; armadilloed by our mothers, belted by our brothers, hitched by maiden aunts who keep us trussed, skirted, stitched, cap a pe – *spiked* in an awful carapace determining our musculature.

But in performance, how we achieve rebellion! – humming now a different tune (out of or in step with the time), the upright good cello-concerto convent girl who in photographs bent away from boys but *here*, in a character that is not 'hers', undoes her gartered self, snips ribbons dons leather blackens teeth breaks legs and other people's arms...

(‘Improbable’, ‘unnameable’, resistant to definition as One, and how utterly failed at achieving libidinal control!) ¹

Performance is liberty because it is the site of fraternity with the body, the liquid / *mercury* <Cocteau stepping through the mirror steps into his own blood > into which one travels as one moves through the space of resistance and hesitation (*délire*) that separates 'self' from 'not-self', becomes a new machine...

• • • • •

— HOW ?

< do we then presume
to begin ?? >

• • • • •

A path must be cleared for a new interpretation of the sensuous on the basis of a new hierarchy of the sensuous and nonsensuous. The new hierarchy does not simply wish to reverse matters within the old structural order... It does not wish to put what was at the very bottom on the very top. A new hierarchy and new valuation mean that the ordering *structure* must be changed. To that extent, overturning Platonism must become a twisting free of it.

[Heidegger, *The Will To Power As Art*]

• • • • •

In workshops, we set up polyrhythms, explore contrapuntals in dinner-table rites, in order to reveal spaces of incompatibility, abrasions, fields where like poles come too close and like mash at air; conduct dialogues between *ankle* and client, finger and police, ear-lobe and Caliban. The rest of the body dissolves, is in service to this point of focus, listening for syncopation and change, because the body accepts it is instrument, stopped and fretted at *this* pitch before it falls into another. Hamlet complains of being fretted like an easy tool. Rosencrantz – or is it Guildenstern? The bodies are Siamese cronies, undifferentiated as Tweedles dum and dee – admits his inability to ‘know’ the instrument. What an insult, then, to Hamlet! What an insult to *the actor* if technique is taught at the cost of exploration of the experience of his/her own body!

• • • • •

This is now the only use which language can have: an instrument of madness, of uprooting of thought, of revolt, a labyrinth of unreason, not a dictionary into which the pedants ... direct their mental contradictions ...

• • • • •

We have been armchaired for too long, in theory and in practice.

• • • • •

PRISONS

• • • • •

My mind to me a Kingdom is ...

– a kingdom ordered, ruled, and stacked with pearls, but one which deliberately denounces the *origins* of those pearls in the rebellions of an oyster. The Body in such a realm is rendered *hard* – forgets the uterine contractions of the skin at birth, the muscular contractions at the birth of the scream, the judgments made in the muscles at the very birth of language. No other form of exchange puts us under such pressure to ratify convergence / *congruence* of an aesthetic or an idea – between distinct selves, between distinct parts of our own bodies ...

< Thus, the hypocrisy of the dictionary, the labyrinth of *reason*. The schizophrenic recognises the disjuncture between body and voice, and, in the refusal (or inability not?) to play with those dichotomies, is outcast. >

Although each word, even the same in repetition, proffers a different bite along what Andrew Murphie [1988] calls our *softbodies*, we keep discourse like a frisbee at the edges of our teeth, fling it back into the world as displacement that never meets the tongue. But in performance, we must work towards a *double receptivity* which acknowledges inherent change within the very moment of reception, for the body on stage < heightened in its failures due to performance's heightened reality > which fails to swallow words and the distinct, pre-predicative, libidinal relationship of each word to body commits a *perceptible* lie, suffers the ignominy of *Affectation* which Murphie [citing Kleist] laments is the result of an interruption in the heart of movement via objectification which thus displaces movement's soul.² Self-consciousness – the post-predicative assessment of self in action – is death to Affect because it holds this soul *in laboratory*, turns Lot's wife's *turn* to stone.

If the actor puts his ear to his own ribs, listening for the hiccup or hecceity that signals change – even, as Brecht demands, ready to give in to the opposite possibility inherent in the single action – then the result is an avoidance of the gracelessness to which the marionette, “lacking soul and therefore consciousness”, is automatically immune [Murphie, 1987, p. 20 citing Erich Heller: *In the Age of Prose*.]

But whilst the body seeks the egoless condition of the puppet, the body in performance is precisely nobody's toy, answerable, ultimately, only to the vagaries of its own condition.

• • • • •

PALACES

• • • • •

Heidegger, dealing with ontological hierarchies, speaks of a need to ‘twist’ free of the body’s prison. It is notable that whilst in European alchemical traditions our base bodily substance is *Mercury* (to be transformed into panacea or gold), Mercury’s equivalent in the Taosit tradition < *Shakti* or *Kundalini*, the female creative energy > is a snake-spirit lying dormant at the base of the spine which, when activated, can spiral beyond the boundaries of the substantive body, transforms the body itself into the subtle sphere.

Whilst seers and occultists are able to perceive the arteries or *nadis* of this subtle body, it is not uncommon when rehearsing with Clive Barker’s exercise ‘The Gates’ that Laban zones *can be perceived*: lines which animate the cave of the theatre beyond the limits of the rigid form – as if what uncoils at the centre of movement dissolved *outline* ...

• • • • •

centrifuges

R E V E R B E R A T I O N

centrifuges

• • • • •

centrifuges

Gravity

**is the root of
all grace ...**

[Lao-Tzu]

• • • • •

Actor-training usually involves game-playing in an attempt to recapture a certain condition of childhood and reinvolve what Clive Barker likes to call the ‘back brain’.

Grotowski, of course, makes much of this ‘ancient brain’: in performance, one opens out to one’s ancestors, or indeed, to the singer of the song in its first incar/cantation, when it was, perhaps, a mantra to help charm heat onto the mountain.

Such primordial attunement has its place in ancient rituals, shamanistic practices, Jungian and somatic therapies and, according to Neumann, belongs to the natural condition of the pre-ego-logical infant “suspended ... in the wholeness of an elemental field of Being” where

... the child's still undifferentiated body image is as large and undelimited as the cosmos. Its own sphere is so fused with the world and hence with everything that we call the outside, that it may well be termed cosmic in scope.

[Erich Neumann, *The Structure and Dynamics of the Nascent Personality*; in Levin, 1985, p. 260]

But *affect* cannot simply be taken as a question of identification with shape, pattern, movement, sound. Being *moved* is never a question of equivalence < indeed, *affect* revolts against the idea of being cloned >, but more a realisation made much as the sea at the cliff's edge speaks to our fluidity, yet reminds us of our bones ...

< *Identification* (with actor, with part) is less seductive than frightful, abject, a centripetal force which draws energies, identities, threatens the kind of erasure which precedes *loss*; presumes that to take on a part we permit hijack, allow the self to be overwhelmed. > ³

As Grotowski argues, the body which sings with ancestral resonance must do so *within* the corporeality of its present form. In fact, he describes life *per se* as a complex balancing process between past and present, identity and difference, 'axial' and animal man. Relation to the acting body has nothing to do with *control*, but to a sympathetic resonance which plays with difference, allows one to free-fall into a zone < 'the gravitational centre of movement' > perpetually in flux; unstable, resistant to the alphabet, giving affective shape to the pre-ego-logical yet teasing the predicative sensibility as well. Such a heterogeneous condition serves precisely the function Kristeva ascribes to the *poetic*, which

departs from the signified and the transcendental ego and makes [of art] something other than knowledge: *the very place where social code is destroyed and renewed ...*

[Kristeva, 1980, p. 132]

If this condition in which performance takes place makes for "a contradictory and mysterious fullness" [Grotowski, 1988], then it is because Affect acts on *each* body of performance in *respect* of heterogeneity,

D E L I R E / delirium / *ecstasy*

< – why else do we partake of theatre?? >

makes of both actor(s) and audience what Kristeva terms 'sujets-en-proces' (subjects-in-process; subjects on trial).

• • • • •

The process we describe is thus a continual *re*-making, a continual realigning and reactivating of the poetic resonance of bodies < of performance, of audience > in that moment's space. If the artist does not work with *great* acuity, the audience is left at best unstartled, disengaged; at worst, *corpsed* by the fraudulent impersonation of what our art could be. Such impersonation encourages an audience not trained to expect < ecstasy > to *keep* tendering its excuses for work that is uncharged and untuned. Appalling condition: – Do we deal in simulacra or in what it is *possible* to achieve?

————— Out
of fissures we bring forth mountains ...

we can create beyond (what we “know”)
we can *speak*
with different voices we can
resource our capacity
to change
we can work with anorexics,
actors, students,
anyone trapped by technique or form;

we can counter:

pain and terror of the precipice because every action has its equal and opposite reaction: the foot steps out and we can always return – not unchanged, but whole, resonant, resilient, expressive and *affective*. force feeding form regenerating force so that clarity is *continuous* and gives the lie to Deadliness in our theatre practice. *All* of our theatre practice.

.

Such fluidity is not easy:

< of dust made, to dust returnable, in handfuls of dust, *such* fear!!)

It means operating in a continuous present, a continuous state of receptivity,

< let < it > be to be to be, let < it > be to be to be >

and being *particularly*
finely tuned.

In such a precarious theatre which disturbs the normal, psychic well-being, every performance can be your last. You should consider it as such, the final possibility of reaching out to others, crying out your last word, your testament. The reckoning of your actions.

[Barba, 1986, p. 23]

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Let's try.

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NOTES

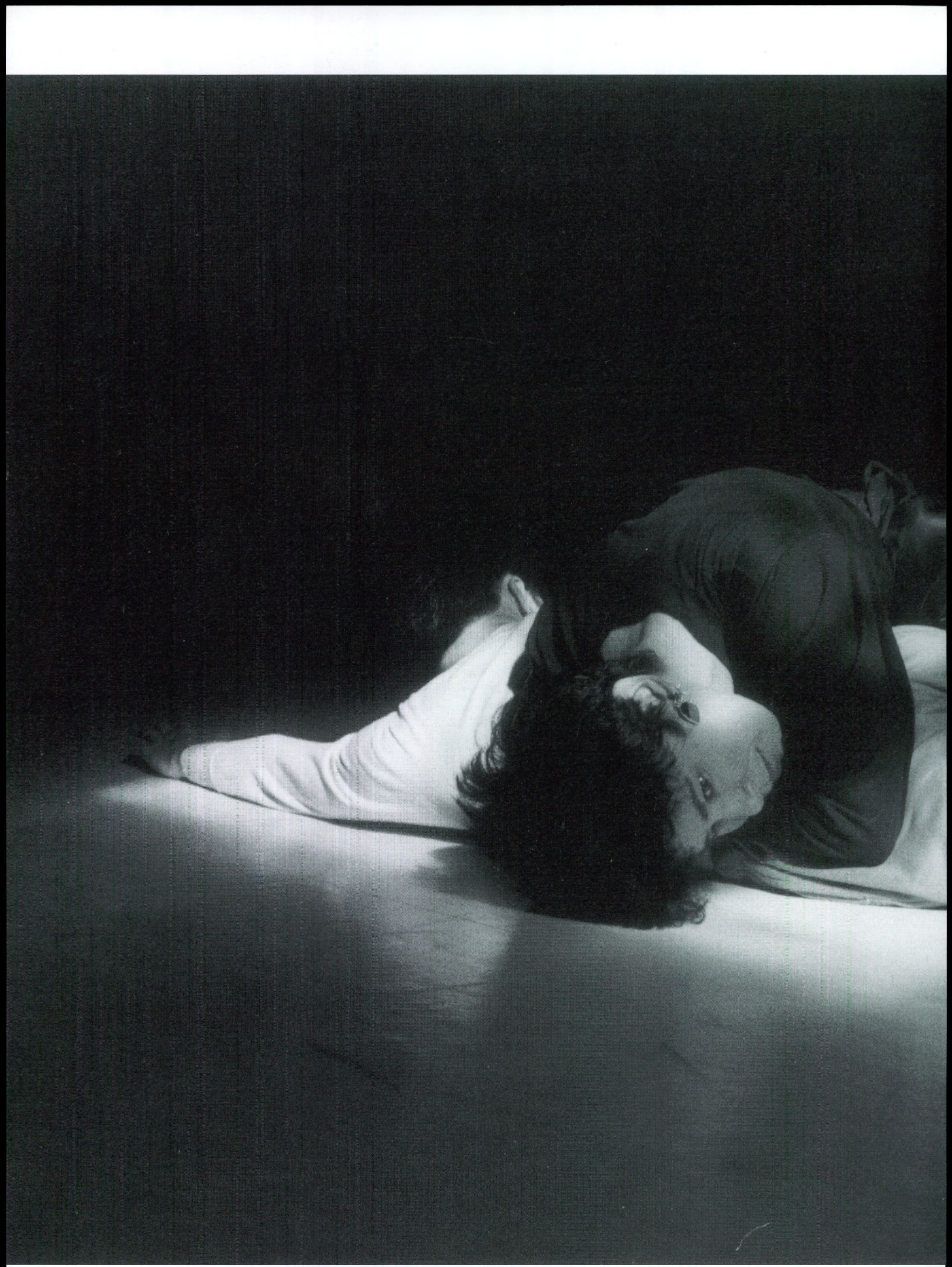
1. Plato's *Timeus*, from whom Kristeva borrows the term "chora", judges it as maternally connoted and hence worth "not even the rank of a syllable."
2. In Plato's *Phaedo*, *Epiphenomenalism* is where the soul is related to harmony as harmony of musical instrument is to that instrument itself. Presumably, if the instrument perishes, so then must its music; if (stage) Body is untuned, then so must it be with its soul. In order to be able to enter into the soul of movement, the body's relation to gravity cannot be suffering from Affectation, not fear of Vertigo or Death by Water.
3. Such forcing of clean distinction of self from not-self is a premise which goes against all that modern physics proves ourselves to be: if $e = mc^2$, then the difference between matter and other matter is a question of relative *density*. To assume another part is not to 'lose' the self, but to become more or less condensed, with the ever-present possibility of return.

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ILLUSTRATIONS

The illustrations accompanying this article are by the author.



JOHN MCCORMACK AND DEBORAH HAY, AUSTIN, TEXAS. PHOTOGRAPH BY HELLEN SKY



Pas de Deux

This piece, written in 1983, indirectly followed discussions about pas de deux with leading ballet teachers and co-occurred with my deepening interest in the work of Nanette Hassall and other artists whose kinesthetic approach was outside the realm of ballet and rejected gender cliché.

It is a *highly personal* reflection of pas de deux as it has been practised in the last 40 years. The choreography referred to is specifically post-Graham neo-classicism although various other allusions are made.

The prose style is after *The Diary of Vaslav Nijinsky*. This device struck me as contextually relevant because Nijinsky is ballet's only radical thinker, in as much as he questioned and abandoned traditional ballet aesthetics while continuing to work in the ballet sphere. From a purely literary point of view, Nijinsky's writing style appealed to me because of its simplicity which simultaneously conveys bewilderment and insight.

Pas de deux is French. It means step of two. In ballet, pas de deux is very important. It is the highlight of the ballet, when the danseur and the ballerina dance together. It is a very old tradition, one which should have gone out of date. Maybe it is out of date but no-one takes any notice. They just go on making new ballets all with pas de deux in them. The most traditional form of pas de deux shows the two dancing together, then in solo variations, one each, and then again together. It may finish with a simple flourish, like a slow, supported turn. More usually it ends with a difficult, acrobatic step. So it is very grand.

Pas de deux is very beautiful. At least that is what everybody thinks. They don't really understand pas de deux. John Cranko thought pas de deux was about love so he always tried to show this. But pas de deux is not about love. If it was about love you would sometimes see two men or maybe two women doing pas de deux as well. Pas de deux is about a man and a woman. It is a medium for a man's body and a woman's body, together.

Traditional pas de deux tries to show harmony between the two bodies and celebrate their difference. In this century pas de deux has also been used to show conflict. There is psychological conflict and physical conflict. It is conflict between two bodies and two minds. We live in a world of conflict, a world not of victors as in ancient times, but a world of the defeated. Pas de deux reflects this. There are bodies which are defeated and there are minds which are defeated.

Traditionally, pas de deux was only a part of a larger ballet. This is no longer so and there are many ballets consisting of pas de deux only. The context is reduced to the personal level. There are only the two bodies of the man and the woman, so the two minds also become important. They replace the larger setting of action to create the impact. Someone well – known has already made a pas de deux in which the two bodies don't come into any physical contact. They touch, maybe even rape each other psychologically from their separate parts of the stage. But that is really avoiding the issue of the two bodies, of the man and the woman.

Pas de deux takes place on stage. Even if it is just an open place, it is still a stage. Once pas de deux was set in grand ballrooms, in palaces, in village squares or in misty woods. In this century it has been placed in drawing rooms, on streets, in the bedroom and on beaches. A few have been set in gymnasiums. Now that there are no more dungeons we have

gymnasiums. There is a dungeon in *Tosca* but there is no pain in singing. Singing takes pain away. Everybody should sing. You can sing by yourself. But pas de deux takes a man and a woman. Boys and girls cannot do pas de deux because their bodies are too young. With development comes strength. It takes strength to do pas de deux.

The man and the woman should be on the stage together for pas de deux. If one or the other is on the stage alone, the pas de deux cannot start. However, the man may be on the stage first because that is the natural order. First came man and then woman.

This pas de deux takes place in a garden. The potted sunflower in the left corner of the stage tells you it is a garden. There is a man in the garden. He loves being in the garden on this golden morning, we see him in profile. He lifts one leg waist – high in front of him and then swings it through to the back. As it passes the leg on which he stands, his body leans forward. His arms are stretched out in front in a straight line with the leg at the back. He reaches out to the sunflower. Just then a woman runs on, stageright, and the pas de deux begins. She approaches the man, facing us as she reaches his outstretched foot. She brushes against it and sends him revolving on his supporting leg. She steps aside a little. It seems as if it is only the woman's touch which sends him spinning. But it is not. If you look at the foot on which the man is standing, you can see it shifting in a circle on the floor. The ball of the foot stays on one spot but the heel is moving in a circular line. It slides and stops and slides and stops. It only looks like the woman's touch moves the man but he was only waiting for that, in order to start.

He has turned a full circle before he sees her. His arms and raised leg are still outstretched. He turns his palms up and slowly curls his fingers into them as if he has grasped something from where his body is now directed. Then he contracts both his arms and his leg while the knee of the supporting leg bends. It is all very soft. The leg being contracted is lowered to the floor behind the supporting leg, the toes placed behind the heel of the foot in front. Now the man straightens himself and, placing his legs wide apart, he grows very tall. His fists, still clenched are by his side. He looks at the woman.

She is standing simply, arms relaxed by her side, but the feet are turned out and ready to dart off. She glances at the man then looks away too quickly, eyes lowered. She brings her head up slowly and then looks boldly at the man. While she looks at him she snatches her legs together, raising her feet, one placed in front of the other, to half pointe. She turns a half circle, away from the

man but never taking her eyes off him. So now she is looking over her shoulders. Her front foot is flat on the floor. The other leg is extended behind, toes pointed and touching the floor. She turns her head to the wings and bolts. The man pauses. He brings his legs together and unclenches his fists. He looks as if he might stretch himself out again as he did when he was alone enjoying the golden morning. But no, he runs after the woman.

We cannot see what happens next. We see only the empty garden. Some time passes. The lights slowly dim. The couple re-enters the stage together from the opposite side. They dance. He spins her around and lifts her high above himself and then lowers her gently, sliding her body to the ground between his legs. Still holding her hands he steps over her and pulls her up to him in an embrace. Now they dance very fast. She jumps and jumps, her legs like scissors while he holds her hand running behind. They move in a circle. He slips, she falls but they manage to go on as if nothing has gone wrong. They dance some more until they are quite worn out. It becomes a contest to see who will survive the other. There is no telling how it will end. They pretend to be dancing with each other but really they are dancing against each other.

If pas de deux was about love, they would be supporting and sustaining each other. Although it looks like the man is supporting the woman, he is really only showing his strength. Sometimes he falters. The woman is not dancing her joy in his company. She is only trying to show off her beauty and accomplishment. It takes all her strength to hide the effort. They are called good partners.

Pas de deux is about such a man's body and such a woman's body, together. People pretend to understand it but they do not. It is impossible to understand. Vaslav Nijinsky understood that it was impossible to understand. Pas de deux is absent from his choreography. The closest he came to pas de deux was in *Jeux* which had a trio of two women and one man playing a game of tennis. In *L'après midi d'un faun* the male faun desires the female nymph but she runs away before they can do pas de deux. The faun satisfies himself with the scarf she drops. He is content, knowing that pas de deux is not for him because he is not a man and the nymph is not a woman.

Pas de deux is not merely about a male and a female. It is nonsense about a man's body and a woman's body, together.

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The Discussion Continues

These notes represent an attempt to communicate my personal view of, and response to, the discussion on post-modernism which was held at the Institute for Contemporary Art, London, in May, 1985. This and the paper which I wrote some months ago, "Seeing Post-Modern Work", have no copyright and may be duplicated or used in any way. My only aim is to further the debate on post-modernism.

Just in passing, a brief thought floats out over the assembled conference, and is destined to the oblivion of forgetfulness; not because it has no value or is unheard, but because it is so obvious as to be continually forgotten: "Within aesthetics emancipation is born." ¹ And the relationship between art work that resists the establishment and the issue of political change emerges. Art work that resists IS politics, the politics of questions, the politics of change: not a specific and categorised phenomenon to be put up instead of the present establishment, but an amorphous unrest characterised by general misgivings about the way things seem to be at the moment.

We are working now in a time after aesthetics can be considered in terms of prescriptive rules and qualitative judgement. The recent project of modern man and woman to provide value for mankind as a whole and to assure us that progress is possible has failed. Outright. Nobody believes that we will return to a time when there is employment for everyone, barring total holocaust, of course, which must be an option left aside for mankind, unprepared by its total rejectability. And nobody believes that cultural hegemony is a possible on-going position for the wealthy West. Though exploitation has served us selfishly well, it is finished, not because we wish it,

but because it is intrinsically a failing method for existence, leaving us friendless, vulnerable, and strategically weak. Exploitation has bred insecurity between allies and deception of the majority of people worldwide.

Enough. Things are bad. The spiritual project of re-inventing the present is unfinished but now influenced by the struggle for survival. We struggle with confusion over lost ideals, with being alone in the absence of those ideals. We struggle with technology, with fragmentation and with the supplanting of bits of information where wisdom used to be revered. Life is crumbling into a struggle with guilt, having inherited a dream which is not possible to fulfill, still partly believing that we should have been able to fulfill that dream, not accepting its impossibility. Survival of mind as well as body, not in pieces, but as one construct, body – mind, is difficult to achieve.

Rules are changing. Though seeming to be a general assault on the political establishment, this writing is really an assault on aesthetics.

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May 1985

Dear Aesthetics,

You are very ill and the prognosis isn't very good. I regret seeing you at this moment because your once powerful self is in decline, and I wish I could have held on to the image of you as being whole, right, knowing how things should be done in a pleasing and beautiful manner.

O! Dear A, how I mourn your demise.

Still, life must go on, and there are a number of things I've got to do this evening before bed. There's the laundry and a bit of supper to get, supervision of homework – please forgive my rushing off. I just don't seem to have time to stick around for the last act of your drama.

By the way, the children are both well. They're working on computers at school.

They've got the language pretty well learned and are starting to interfere with their games – just making a few improvements, you know.

Well, 'bye for now. Have a happy ending. I'll be thinking about you from time-to-time. Last analysis, etc.

Respectfully, Mary.

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Having done away with aesthetics we are left where? Speak for yourselves, architects, artists, musicians, writers, the French philosophers, all of you who have so happily knocked off aesthetics, and I will speak for myself. What has my choreographic work got to do with the demise?

What a surprise. Our arguments are all the same, shared.

The post-modern condition, which is emerging after the demise of aesthetics, the failure of progress, the complexity of technology and the need to move elsewhere, is typified by:

IN AESTHETICS:

Post-modernism retreats from the Subject to the subject.

The theory of the sublime contradiction replaces aesthetic criticism centred on the definitive.

The sphere of authority of aesthetics extends to considerations of technology and politics.

New technologies are seen as remarkable in that they are not mechanical substitutes, but creations of mental and linguistic operations, of mind and matter.

“Hard” and “soft” sciences are seen to merge as mind and matter are perceived to be the same.

The sublime contradiction emerges in the absence of beautiful form.

The sublime contradiction raises a loneliness in consciousness which demands the question, “Where is community?”

IN POLITICS:

There is a demand for the general emancipation of all people.

Progress disappears as a possible aim.

Decay in confidence when regarding the two previous centuries brings into question the hypotheses that profitable results can be the overall aim for humanity.

Profitable results are suspected as not always being justified in their means of achievement.

A multiplicity of belief becomes possible.

Earlier claims by all political parties to help people to help themselves are disputed.

IN ARCHITECTURE:

Proliferation of diversity gives rise to the project of transformations in space, giving rise to the project of rebuilding the whole space occupied by humanity.

The tactile rather than the visual gains dominance.

The debate of information versus experience occurs.

“Critical Regionalism”² is a factor in environmental planning.
Architecture resists hegemony, produces reflexive culture.
The question is asked “For Whom is post-modern architecture made?”³
Architects undertake a search for a “Space of endlessness.”

IN THE ARTS:

The post – modern question pervades thinking.
Modernity is obsolete.
Analysis and reflection provide a means to avoid repeating the past.
Art works are seen as either complicitous or resistant.
Rules and criteria are in doubt.
“Art is taken from outside its enclosure of perception, taste and creative acts.”⁴
“What is the rule for producing art?” becomes “What are rules?”⁵
The avant – garde aesthetic becomes irrelevant, being made in terms of taste. Art
no longer seeks a supreme destination.

IN MUSIC, DANCE, THEATRE AND WRITING:

Ideological reproduction is used as intervention in performance; works discuss
themselves.
The ordinary gains importance.
The hollowness of the spectacle is revealed.
Simplicity rises in opposition to fragmentation.
The process of differencing causes proliferation, overcoming boundaries be-
tween areas of concern.
Work produced is disturbing.
Work produced questions the supremacy of techniques.
Work disappears after being seen (read) because the audience (reader) lacks
identifiable principles with which to look.
Traditional ways of looking are challenged.
The kinetic, non-verbal, challenges verbal dominance in these fields, and some
verbal work seeks to destroy itself in presentation.
Works de-construct themselves as they are performed.
Manipulation of means rather than product occupies performers.
Works seek continual redefinition.

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True Confession

I do it for money. I have to. It’s the only way I can survive. Use me,
anybody, as long as you pay.

But there’s something going on that I can’t explain. Somebody’s
been using my name – just my name – sort of putting it around
a bit. If there’s another woman using my name – just my name,

working my area – she'll get her's. I'll send somebody around to mess her up a bit, like beyond recognition, maybe. Can't have anybody messing around here. I'm going to make it real hard for her to get by. It's a promise. The only problem is, I can't seem to find her. Like she's invisible, unknowable. Anyway, if she ever comes around, I'll see it done.

Sublime

Sig. Sublime

.....

The word "sublime" has a slippery sound in English, the sound of unctuous appreciation. "Oh! My dear, that was simply sublime," used occasionally by some people of a certain socio-economic background when searching for an experience which is fundamentally complicitous in its nature. Recent aesthetic discussions involving this word refer to an earlier use of the word. This recent use is interesting because it revives an historical moment in thinking identified by Kant, where from confusion springs a perception of order, this order being *then* a perception of "universal order", and *today* a perception of "what is." The search continues for a description of that which is indescribable. It would be unfortunate if that search were misinterpreted because of colloquial usage among some people of the word "sublime". The idea itself, as present within Lyotard's writing, reflects a vigorous perception of the unknowable. It is allied not particularly to a class of people, but arises from its historical context which must be seen as part of Lyotard's present intention. In fact, the word "sublime" is used by Lyotard to describe work which resists being completely known and thus defies complicity with established and acceptable patterns of thought. This is nearly opposite in its implications from its occasional but ordinary usage.

In all areas the question of definition appears. It is within the search for the sublime experience where the mixture of pleasure and pain produces doubt about what is happening, and this doubt is an image of the present social and political environment. The burden of giving up the romantic ideal leaves us all grieving but energetic within a project that is after definition.

Given the energy to exist within the present, why is there so much cultural and political retrenchment at this particular moment in time? It is because the present power structures are under pressure. Things haven't progressed as they should have done. Many people seem to believe that the reason for this is simply that we haven't tried hard enough. A renewed effort is being made to contain the forces of change which have upset us to such an extent, which have brought our tradition and views and values into question. But these forces are by their very nature going to erode the wall of stability and make a small sandy beach as the territory of the future, where ideas will exist on an intimate, not grand, scale, and defined by their proximity and presence to each other. Retrenchment into the definitive is a lost cause. It is a ball game where one team has lost the ball to the other side because the rules have been updated. The game has been revised. It is no longer played by us, but by the complex forces at work on us, in us, and through us.

Time to finish. A parting shot.

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May, 1985

Dear Polemic,

I love you madly. I love you for your brave use of space, for your courage in setting off arguments that exist around but not about the issues at stake. You are so wonderfully large! I know you are misunderstood, especially when you speak in translation, (but then so am I). In fact, I even distrust you myself from time to time. Nevertheless, you have given me so much. How can I possibly go on with this sublime love I have for you – that I believe and distrust you in the same moment? Please say you love me too. Only please, love me for what I am.

Love, Mary

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It is necessary to discuss the importance of this issue of post-modernism. I went to the ICA in the naive hope that I would find there a discussion of post-modern aesthetics, set off by questions from the Frankfurt School. I discovered that there are no longer aesthetics. There is instead a general and broad discussion of "what is." I came away informed that, though the issues of post-modernism occur on a small scale and inhabit a life of the ordinary, they are being considered by some as a fundamental change on a large scale comparable to great historical changes of the past. The issues are being considered in a much more ecumenical way than I had imagined. The specious search for discussion on the second day, looking for evidence of post-modernism in commercial television, popular music and fashion design seemed evidence of a misunderstanding of the real manifestations of such thinking in English cultural life. One shouldn't choose to look for areas of resistance within forms that exist primarily because they are complicitous. Perhaps resistance exists there, but not fundamentally. I was left recalling Lyotard's statement "Within aesthetics emancipation is born," and there was, in my experience of the conference, much to consider.

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NOTES

1. Jean Francois Lyotard, Conference "A Question of Post Modernity" ICA May 25th and 26th, 1985.
2. Kenneth Frampton, as above.
3. Lyotard, as above
4. Philippe Lacoue-la Barthe, as above.
5. Lyotard, as above.







Moving about the World

An Interview with Elizabeth Dempster

In 1989/90 Melbourne-based dancer/choreographer Elizabeth Dempster showed a new dance work called *WHISPER: "CORAGGIO"*. The piece was developed in two stages. It was first performed as a solo by Dempster in the Spoleto Fringe Dance Fest. 1989. The second stage was a trio made with Anne Thompson and Jo McEndry, and was performed as part of the Local Motion season of new dance work held at the Athenaeum theatre earlier this year.

Programme notes for *WHISPER: "CORAGGIO"* and specific images through the dance indicated that it was in some way 'about torture'. In the programme a fragment of an Amnesty International story was quoted: "The prisoner, alone in long, solitary confinement and repeatedly tortured, found within a loaf of bread a matchbox containing a small piece of paper that had written on it the single whispered word 'Coraggio'. [Take courage]."

Visual design material – a set of hanging screens, projected slides, a trough of water – contributed to the construction of images in the piece. The dancing was characterised by delicacy and restraint, even diffuseness. This was the case even in a 'rough' trio where two dancers 'manhandled' the third. Moments of direct attack in movement were confined to a solo in red by Dempster; and an extended, relatively fast-paced duet in unison for Dempster and McEndry, performed with a penetrating focus on the movement's physicality.

In her programme note the choreographer also articulated a social intent for the work: "At the heart of *WHISPER: "CORAGGIO"* is not an act of torture, but an act of substitution or rescue by which we who are well and free, speak and act for those to whom speech and action are denied."

What follows are some questions I put to Elizabeth Dempster regarding her work, and her written replies. The questions arise from my interest in witnessing the explicit articulation of political issues in new dance work, as this always raises questions about, and presents a challenge to, the familiar categories of 'form' and 'content'. I felt *WHISPER: "CORAGGIO"* was of particular interest because the choreographer's practice is grounded in Ideokinesis [see *WRITINGS ON DANCE 1: IDEOKINESIS AND DANCEMAKING*], a process sometimes accused of producing performance work that is too 'personal' or introspective.

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I: I regard your work as being politically engaged. This is not only in the sense that you are committed to a process of allowing the emergence of new forms in performance, but also because, in your most recent work at least, you seem to be seeking to address, overtly, a social issue. I am interested in the tension that seems to come into play in an art practice that is politically committed in a direct sense but yet which emerges from a process of inner focusing, of patient listening and waiting and even through, as you have said elsewhere, the experience of 'moments of grace' for the artist. Would you comment on this?

DEMPSTER: In *Whisper: "Coraggio"* as I see it, there is no tension in the sense of some inherent contradiction between the political stance of the work and its methodology. This piece requires that the performers, in a strictly circumscribed and provisional sense, occupy the place of victim, and that their vulnerability as such is the subject of a public spectacle. This state of vulnerability is the ground and subject of the work.

Now in this I'm not talking exclusively, or even particularly, of those actions like the dunking, which tend to be read in fairly direct representational terms. I'm meaning that the idea and experience of vulnerability is threaded through the whole work. States of vulnerability and dissolution are represented imagistically (and perhaps archetypally) in things like Jo's 'blind girl' dance at the beginning of Part Two. And the idea of dissolution or deconstruction (unmaking) is there as a major structural dynamic in the work. But these states are also present, and more fundamentally perhaps, because they permeated our work process; they are present not only in concrete kinetic images but as a kind of emotional substrate informing the whole piece. The vulnerability and openness that is an inherent and necessary part of a rehearsal process based on imaging and improvisation at times found expression in very forceful ways. I'm not talking about passivity here.

I think of this piece as a kind of essay upon the relationship between vulnerability and power. If in conventional thinking, vulnerability is equated with weakness – to be vulnerable is to risk powerlessness – here I am proposing a different kind of relation between those terms. It's not at all a matter of unthinkingly identifying with, or attempting to portray, some unknown victim. I say 'occupy the place of victim' because I'm interested in giving that place a voice, an expression. But I don't hear or see it as a personal voice, or in terms of a personal narrative. It's a matter of strategy. I was interested in a reversal of sorts whereby the vulnerable, the silent and the unspoken (the unspeakable) became the subject and centre of the *drama*. I've tried to pursue this project primarily through formal, structural means. And this does, I think, create a point of tension which is not without political significance.



There's a tension produced by the disjunction between the style and quality of movement and the piece's ostensible subject. The movement is fluid and serene at times; moments of resistance are static, not insistent in their physicality. Activity is localised, episodic and there's confusion – a certain undecidability – surrounding the meaning of certain gestures and actions. In Jo's and Anne's first duet for example: is it an embrace or is she on the rack?

I'm cognisant of the fact that there is a difficulty about the piece which is not only its 'difficult' subject matter. There's an insistence on ambiguity, paradox and contradiction which amounts to a refusal or disavowal of clarity. The piece proceeds from and recreates a point of crisis. It does not *go* anywhere: the *Return* of Part Two is not a movement out, but a restating in a different mode of the same point of crisis. This piece must necessarily be incomplete, unresolved on some level. So there's a sense of dis-ease about the whole process – in the performing and, I suspect, in the watching.

2: In making your work does a particular thought or do thoughts about the world form the context for your movement investigations, or do connections with the social and political world arise and form themselves primarily as you move?

DEMPSTER: It's not that I have a *particular* thought about the world that seeks expression through movement. At the beginning of a project there will be a number of sometimes conflicting interests and thoughts which initially provide the context for movement investigations. But these ideas are often overturned, modified and replaced as new connections and interests arise in the moving itself. Moving is still for me a most productive and challenging means

! He said, "You will o



pen out like a rose'





of thinking about and reflecting upon the world.

Usually I do not have a position, a stance, an idea that I wish to present. That is not the impetus for the work. I enter a project because there are issues I want to think about, experiences I'm curious to explore, and usually some 'itch' – some difficulty, problem, conflict, something to wrestle with. The focus entailed in making a piece provides an opportunity to contemplate, to think through propositions. The process allows me to bring together in a kind of laboratory, un-alike, incompatible ideas, activities, objects. so that they are held in temporary, sometimes strained, relationship. And through this intensification connections which were at first only dimly sensed are revealed. These dances are, as you say, about a process of discovery.

When I say 'proposition' and when I talk about 'thinking through' things I do not mean merely a mental operation. It's not purely an intellectual process I'm describing. What I'm meaning to suggest is that making a work is the setting aside of a prescribed time and space in which to experience different 'conditions', different states of mind, of feeling, of sensation.

When a work is presented the energies and images that initiated the process have been worked, refined, clarified but not necessarily resolved into an integrated whole. *Whisper*: "Coraggio" for example, enacts a cycle of construction/creation and deconstruction/destruction, and that cycle is played out through various means: through abstracted movement; through concrete, functional actions; through verbal material etc. There's a play or progression of colour (red, white, black), and of light or absence of light. But the accumulation of images does not lead towards synthesis and resolution. The work reverses

traditional theatrical form. It turns upon itself. It unravels, deteriorates; it's an undoing of sorts. There's a continual returning to state of potential, to emptiness.

We ended up with a work which intermingles and confuses the profane and the sacred. There's an element of the sacrificial about some of the imagery which I had not anticipated or expected. Although I did know that I wanted the piece to begin with the red solo and the Mahakala chant, which is an invocation to Mahakala/Kali, the Destroyer.

I came across this quote the other day as I was beginning to write these responses to your questions: "When the soul wishes to express something she throws an image of the experience out before her and enters into her own image." [Meister Eckhart]. I think art making is like that.

3: In your art practice how do you conceive of the subjective field intersecting with the social field?

DEMPSTER: Making a piece is about constructing a world, a utopia if you like, so that a work when made and performed encodes and projects information about social relations, about ideals, as well as present realities.

These days I make work to share; an audience is implied at the beginning of the process, which is not to say that I shape the work according to the tastes or values of a particular audience but just that I see choreographing as a social act. In making a work and presenting it I'm staking (making) a claim upon the social field (public arena). We are in a time and a culture which insists upon the triviality of dance and its irrelevance to social and community life. Dance suffers from this rigid delimitation of its 'proper' purpose. Its effect upon the social is short-circuited; its power of influence denied. I'm impatient with that oft-repeated notion that dance cannot be about philosophical or political issues, that it's ill-suited to this kind of inquiry, that its proper province is the emotional and sensuous. The political is not confined to a realm of disembodied rhetorical argument and it seems to me that dance as an art form centred upon the body is in many ways an ideal arena in which to investigate and articulate the political – its actions, impact and effect upon sentient beings. So with this work I'm asking how this might be possible. The piece doesn't proceed from a conviction or confidence about this issue, but with that question.

But it's not simply a matter of the artist's intention. It's as much to do with the readiness of an audience to apprehend political import or, to put it another way, to perceive (or concede) that the expression of an individual sensibility as it is articulated in choreographic form or in something as seemingly personal as a particular quality of touch, has political implication. I don't see that kind of readiness in Australian dance audiences today. There's an unwillingness, a resistance even, to perceive politics in dance. Presumptions about what dance is and *should be* cloud the perceptions so that members of these audiences simply don't hear, or they refuse to engage cognitively with the material that's before them.

4: If we can say that the politics of art lies in form, does the fact that you recently made a work with political content mean that you have something to say about the place of art in the present culture?

DEMPSTER: I cannot know, and I don't presume to be able to imagine the extremities of experience endured by a tortured person and it was not my intention to attempt to depict acts of torture, nor to address this subject in terms of specific social and political contexts. *Whisper: "Coraggio"* is not about specific instances of torture but it is concerned with states of

dislocation and dissolution induced by the deconstruction (wilful and otherwise) of the self. *Whisper: "Coraggio"* is to that extent 'about torture', but it is also about the making of art, what that act of making might mean at this time.

Like most of my work this one contains comment and inquiry about formal issues, about dance as art, what it is, what it might be; and in a way the work is focused in that enquiry as much as it is upon a specific social issue. I'm certainly not saying anything new about the subject of torture and political oppression, and it seems to me that in this instance these issues give more to the art – in terms of challenge to its limits of expression – than the art can possibly give to those issues.

For me the core of the project is not an act of torture but the scrap of paper in the Amnesty International story and the bridge created by that fragile human act. The word *coraggio* was a light in a time of great darkness and chaos. The title *Whisper: "Coraggio"* functions as an invocation; it's a calling up, a calling into being, not a description or a reminder of a past event. The piece does not proceed from a certainty or a clear insight about the place of art in our present culture. I'm asking a question of art: whether and in what ways a fragile act like the making of a dance might function like that scrap of paper, with that resonance and fortitude and love.

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ALL PHOTOGRAPHS ACCOMPANYING THIS ARTICLE ARE BY GAIL GIARUSSO.

WHISPER: 'CORAGGIO' IN PERFORMANCE:

PAGES 38, 39: JO MCENDRY, ANNE THOMPSON AND ELIZABETH DEMPSTER.

PAGE 40: ELIZABETH DEMPSTER.

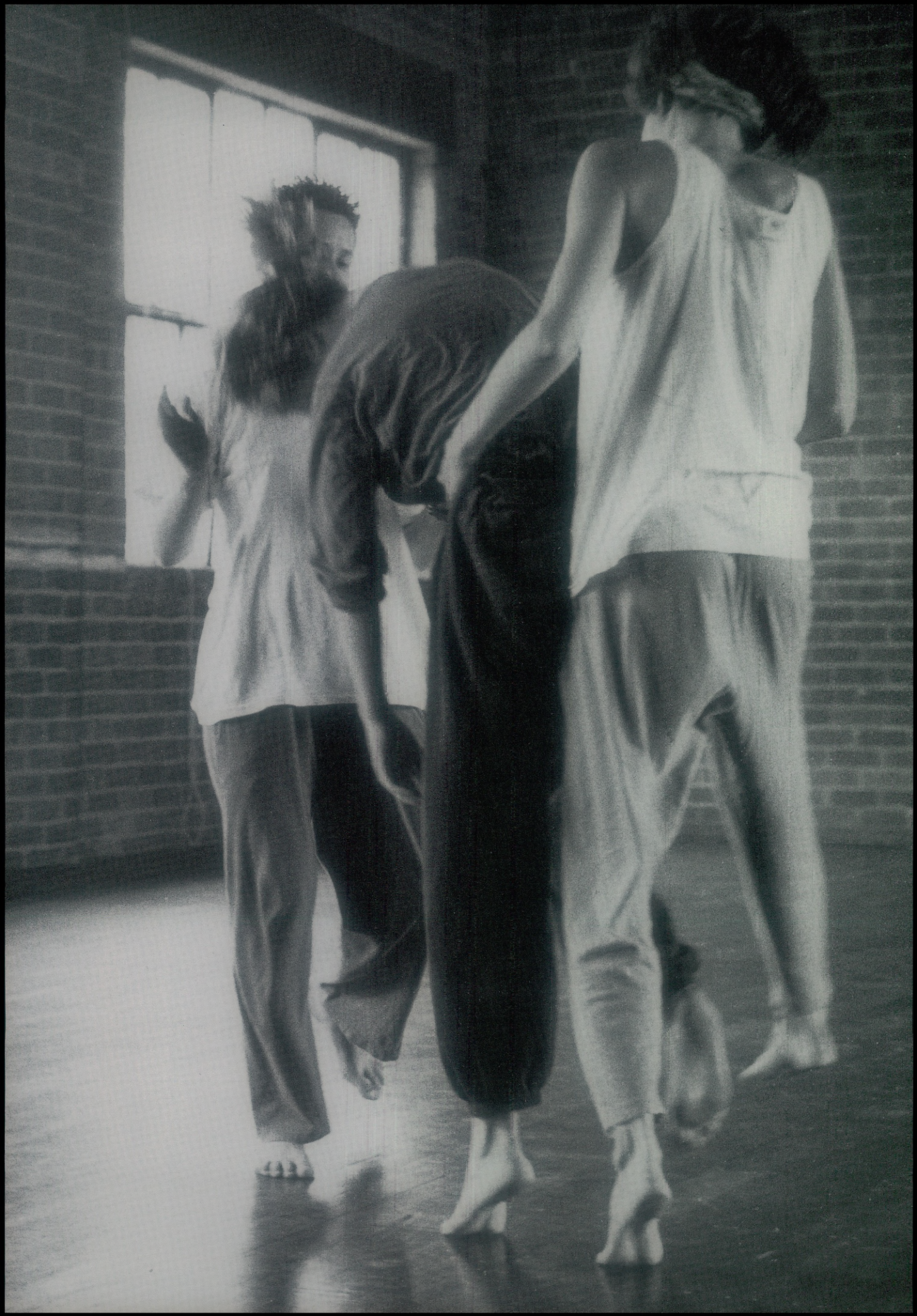
PAGE 43: ANNE THOMPSON, JO MCENDRY AND ELIZABETH DEMPSTER.

PAGES 44, 45: ANNE THOMPSON, JO MCENDRY.

PAGE 46: ANNE THOMPSON, ELIZABETH DEMPSTER AND JO MCENDRY.

WHISPER: 'CORAGGIO' IN REHEARSAL:

PAGE 49: ELIZABETH DEMPSTER, JO MCENDRY AND ANNE THOMPSON.



All for the breath-treasure buried in the belly bowl,
we dared and dived.

Armfuls of finny hands swam away . . .

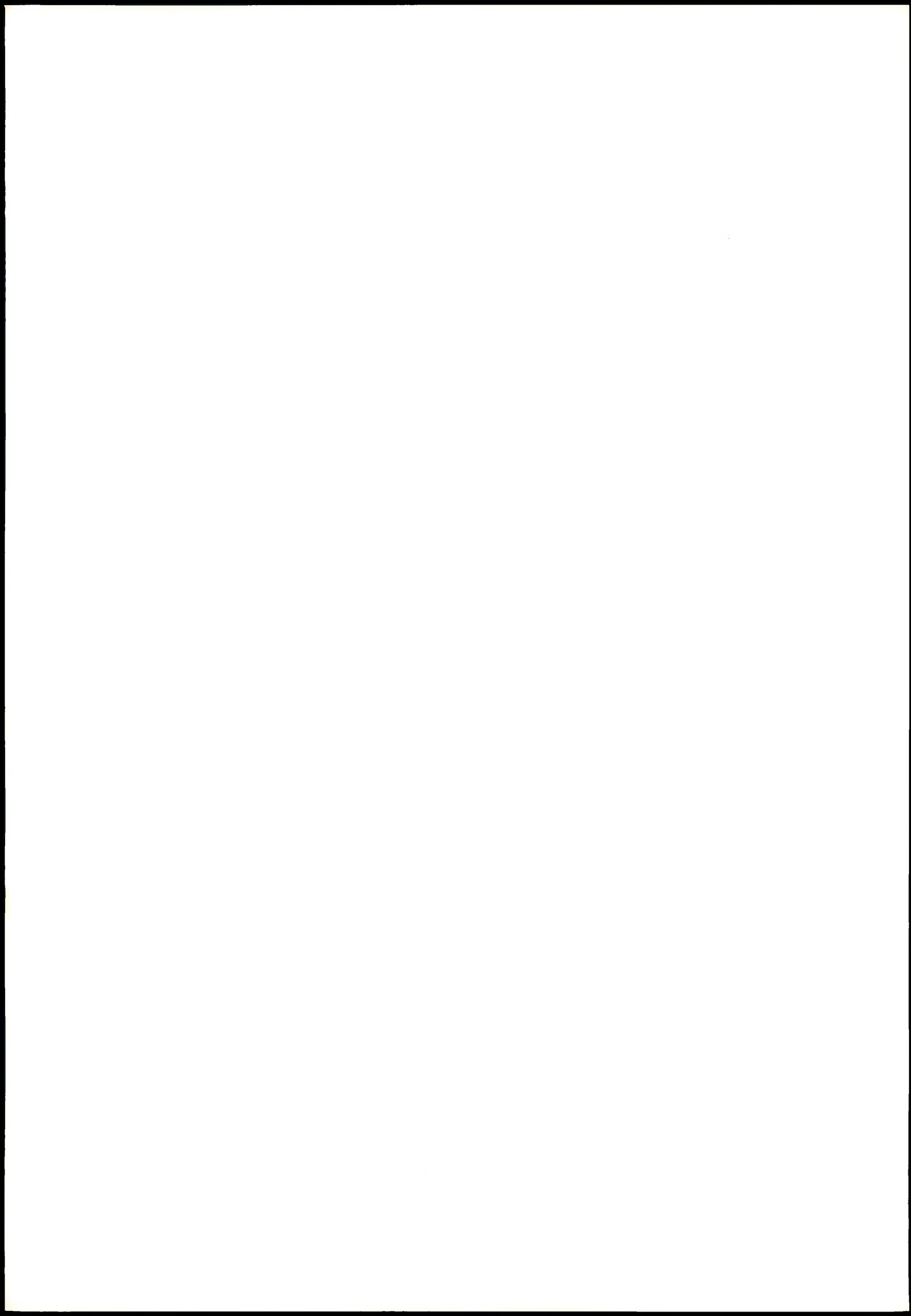
Sing the songs; of the easy-knee pirates,
who waltzed and whistled
and jilted the days
till the years of leaning dangerously
took each, in time, from the edge in
a great, greedy tumble that flung blue
and finished it

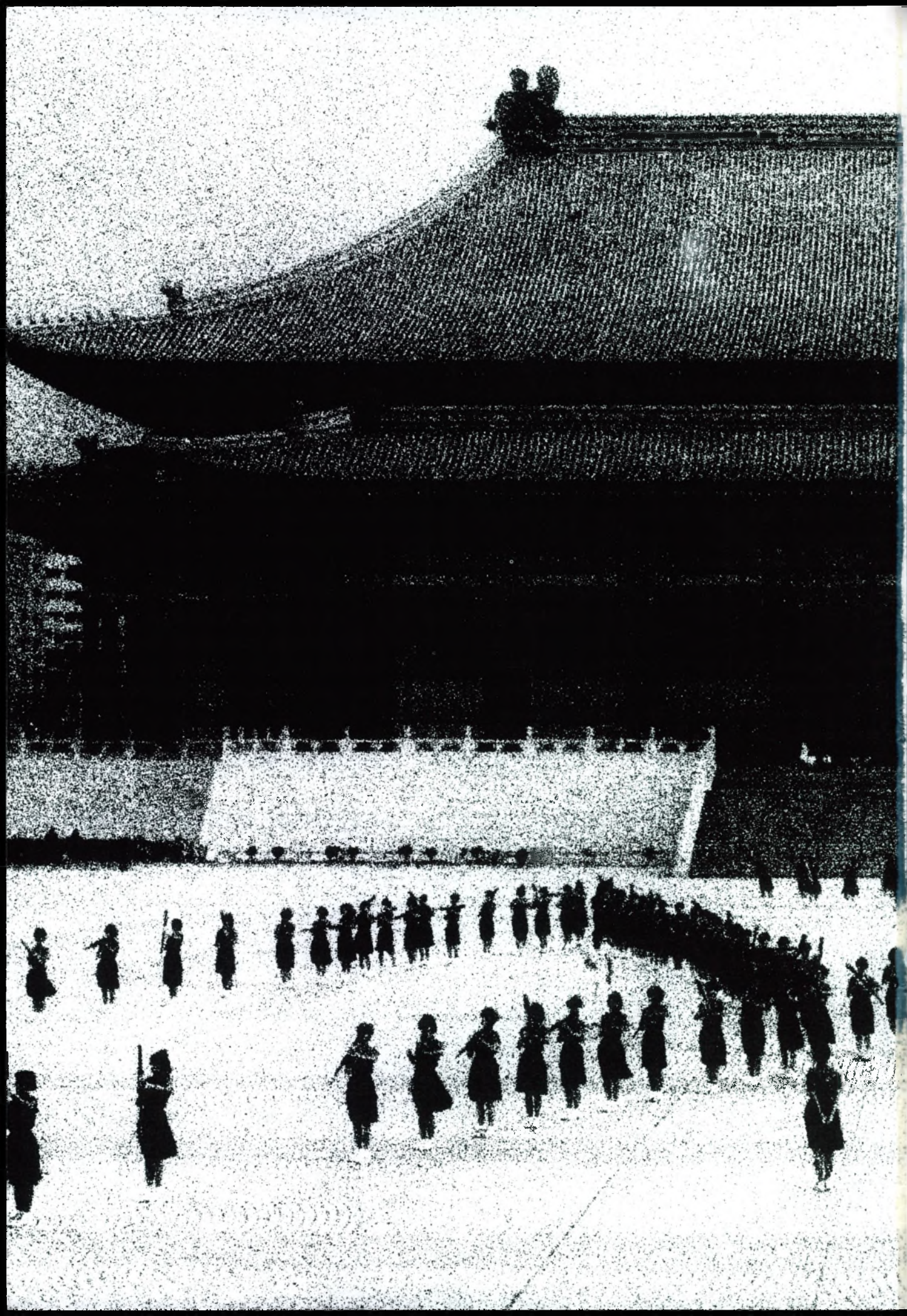
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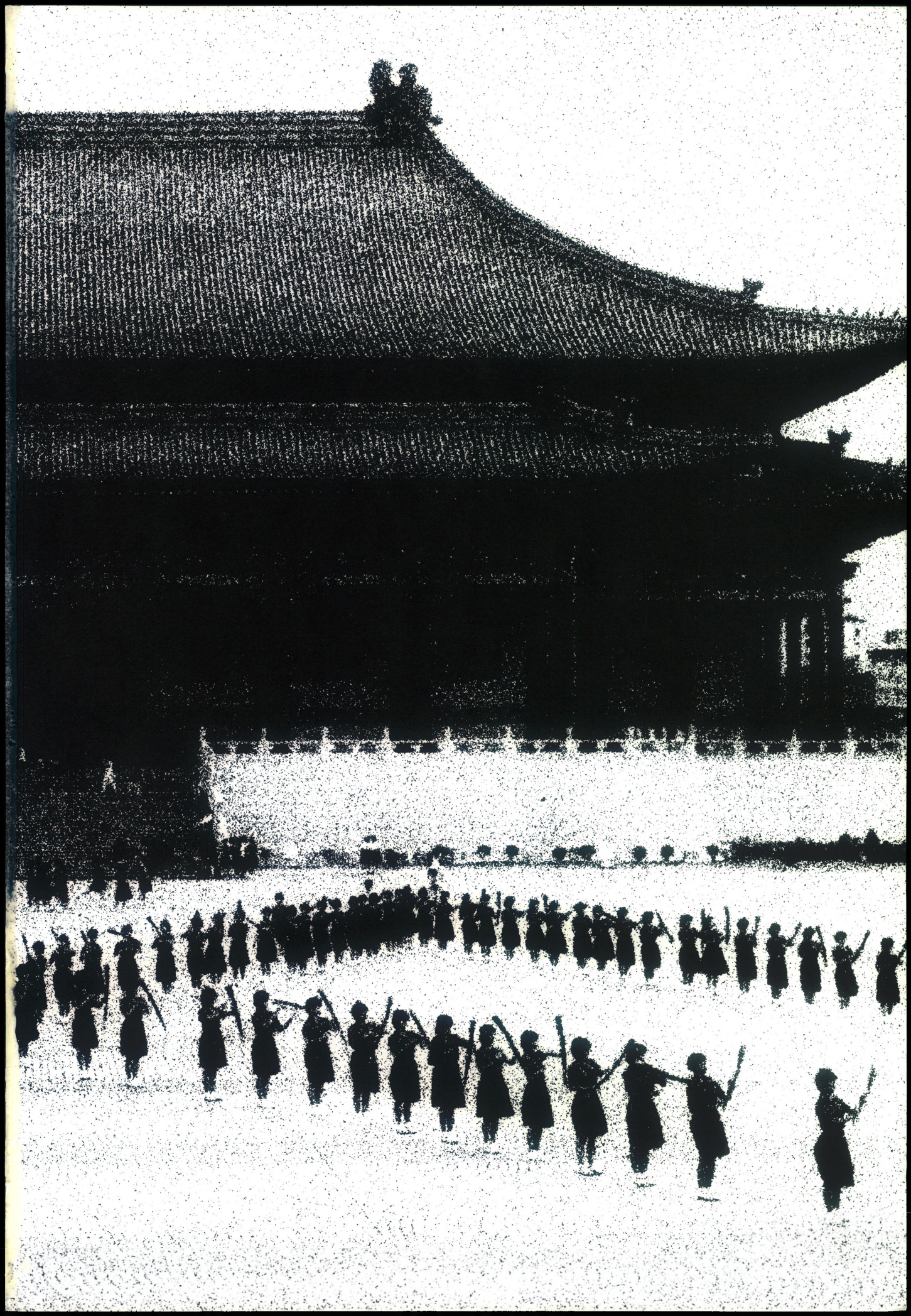
All for the breath-treasure
 skin soaked to the bushy bone
We too walked the plank and washed our sandy skulls
 as smooth as practice . . .

curious priests, moons rose in our knees
and our hearts grew arms, like starfish

KATE KENNEDY







Writings
ON
DANCES