

## Tracking Choreographies – a UK / Australia Transnational Terrain Project.

The following is a draft of a journal article which will be submitted for UK based dance journal 'Choreographic Practices', a Northampton University publication, co edited by Dr Jane Bacon and Dr Vida Midgelow, two leading dance theorists in the area of Dance Ethnography. The article considers some of the research findings from my trip to Australia this summer, in particular considering the terms translation, transformation and transmission in relation to a site based dance practice that has been steered through a transnational terrain inquiry between the SW of England – namely, Dartmoor National Park, Devon - and SW Australia. Themes explored include: the relationship between camera, body and place working with dance and photography media in rural sites | dance ecology | interdisciplinary dance methods | practice as research methods in dance.

*This essay brings together both Orr and Sweeney's respective academic and professional dance backgrounds in outlining a choreographic proposal that involves cross-disciplinary and cross-cultural vernacular around body-place relation. Both dancers originally met through Middlesex University in 2004, where Rachel is pursuing a PhD in Butoh, while Marnie is currently registered on an MA in Professional Practices / Site based dance. Both our movement language has evolved in relation to other non arts disciplines and sciences: Rachel as a Research Fellow at the Centre for Sustainable Futures in the University of Plymouth investigating the area of dance and ecology, and Marnie through her post as Dancer in Residence at the Centre for Interdisciplinary Arts in Perth.*

Dancer Rachel Sweeney working with charred trees that were devastated by bushfires in January 2009 in Maslin reserve, Western Australia.

This essay takes the idea of topographic exchange between place and body, exploring the relationship between sense, perception and memory in relation to the dance practice of ROCKface performance research collective. Founded in 2005, ROCKface is steered by Marnie Orr and Rachel Sweeney, our aim to create a blueprint for long term choreographic collaboration exploring interfaces between dance, ecology and geography. With combined backgrounds in Butoh<sup>1</sup> and Bodyweather<sup>2</sup> practice, the root of our work is to highlight the sensory, kinetic intelligence of the dancer working in immersive conditions.

Our choreographic practice employs immersive processes of inhabitation, duration and exposure towards some of the following lines of movement inquiry: an investigation of the body's relationship to gravity; identification and synthesis of a range of movement qualities and their differences, physical principles and performance vocabularies. While both Body Weather and butoh arguably can be said to share the perception of the dance body as an interdependent entity subsisting as part of the ecology of its surrounding environments, Body Weather practice has evolved a distinct methodological approach that emphasises technical discipline in developing physical stamina through a holistic training system termed MB – Mind/Body – Muscle/Bone.

Working across Dartmoor National Park in South West UK and Kalamunda National Park in South West Australia, ROCKface draw from the intuitive and proprioceptive memory processes of the dancer working in distinct perceptual modes of engagement and in consultation with a range of 'field' professionals working in the disciplines of geography and ecology. Since incurring the additional challenge of a geographic divide between South West Australia and South West UK in 2007, we have continued to develop our work through a transnational terrain inquiry, fed through mapping processes and uploaded using through blog and skype exchange, investigating site-driven performance and movement *for the development of physicality and its associated verbal language for understanding across disciplines*. Our research together now extends like a palimpsest across hemispheres, sustained through rigorous studio-to-field training utilising immersive, inhabitational and durational processes.

Dartmoor National Park August 2009 Bridgetown Western Australia July 2009

Interdisciplinary Methods *ON MAPPING*....

One of our aims in interfacing choreographic languages with those belonging to geography is to attempt to create a three dimensional map as a kind of open, or living document that might regard the body as an interactive agent that exists in response to those conditions set out above, but creates its own discourse by actively changing the signs through the intervention of certain sensory memories (experienced at specified locations).

Such memories might then be transcribed to paper, forming acute demarcation points, just as a legend, symbol or other sign system serves to denote specific points of consideration within a conventional cartographic document. In the refinement of choreographic materials through the transfer of sensory based information back to the performance environment of stage or studio.

Debate on site based choreographic approaches (recorded during planning and preparation time in advance of Sweeney's Australia trip)

Skype Transcript 9th November 2008

[09:39:00] Marnie Orr says: transmission of materials - elements leaving the site - sustainability works as a through line, as strategies for survival - the body in site

[09:40:02] Rachel Sweeney says: plum lines and parabola's. exchange of properties and opposing forces coexisting to maintain tension....we need tension to hold our bodies up!

[09:41:45] Marnie Orr says: gravity in the body - the downwards sense of the spine.

[09:43:43] Marnie Orr says: making little stories. little metaphors. we are working in 'live research' purposes- site-based performance as an ephemeral act.

[09:59:52] Marnie Orr says: the politics of intimacy: socially engaged site-based practice vs. terrain-centred geologic based practice

[10:00:08] Marnie Orr says: terrain-based

enquiry implies a notion of exchange and adaptation

[10:00:50] Marnie Orr says: how can you speak to the land, and how can it speak to you? the 'weathered body' can adapt this notion of exchange in that we were being informed as sensorial, sentient bodies

[10:07:17] Rachel Sweeney says: definitively centred around the body/land relationship... this is also to do with identity...scale. The UK has a different premise- land distribution and ownership decreed through lawful procedures/ economic divides. Maps also reference a passing through lineage (another time line...another timeline not horizontal or perpendicular....)

[10:08:23] Rachel Sweeney says: aboriginal culture implies vertical nature as ownership...it actually defines the horizontal- which may equate to chronological...essentially constitutes our underlying temporal structures

[10:09:39] Rachel Sweeney says: base line of balance is essentially the surface of the earth. 'performing boundaries'...an archaeological inquiry.

[10:19:51] Marnie Orr says: that refers to an earth science-based process – whereas a cartographic or mapping process refers to – sociological mode.

Marnie Orr and workshop participant Billy Rippe.

Mapping Project Dartmoor Devon UK, ROCKface 2007

Rachel Sweeney working with Australian photographer Kim Perrier, Bridgetown WA July 2009

### **Adaptable Bodies**

Interview with Marnie Orr, Australia, June 2009

*Marnie Orr is a Body Weather practitioner and MA student at Middlesex through the Work Based Learning Dept. She currently lives and works in South West Australia, where she runs NavLab- an interdisciplinary research project, looking at ecological, geographical and architectural histories in relation to site based Body Weather training. The following*

*conversation attempts to chart some of our respective independent training experiences in Body Weather and Butoh, while reflecting on the shared working methods as generated through our research collective ROCKface and also INVIVO , a collaborative choreographic research forum which Marnie co-facilitates.*

### **Receptive States**

**R:** Can we start with you telling me a little bit about Body Weather and your experience of it, through the second generation Tess de Quincy / Stuart Lynch lineage?

**M:** I was first introduced to Body Weather in 1998 in Cairns, Queensland through Leah Grycewicz. This was at a

point when I had been working extensively with skill-based circus performance practice centring on object manipulation and public performance intervention work. Following an invitation to participate in a Body Weather Intensive lead by Tess de Quincey in Sydney I decided to move to Sydney to become a founding dancer in de Quincey's dance company where I continued training and performing full time for two years under Tess's guidance, alongside Stuart Lynch<sup>3</sup>.

**R:** Both Butoh and Body Weather, as relatively new traditions which have spread during the past fifty years from their respective cultural roots in Japan to Europe and the States, can be seen to have to contend with issues surrounding *translation* and *appropriation*. While both dance forms share an underlying philosophy towards the body, as well as certain principles of movement, there is a clearly a separation of purpose. Whereas Butoh might be described as, essentially, a performance expression, tied into a cultural aesthetic, Body Weather, it seems, has been cultivated directly out of the conditions of a particular cultural landscape – Min Tanaka's development of the form was intrinsically linked to the natural conditions of the Japanese landscape. Do you think that as a form Bodyweather contains a performance expression, or is it better described as a holistic training system- or both?

**M:** Although Body Weather was founded by a butoh dancer (Min Tanaka), it is foundational that Body Weather is training for creative movement that is not culturally specific or aesthetically based. Thus, whether Body Weather is essentially a performance making tool, a holistic body and mind training or a philosophy remains topical, and differs in its explanation and application between practitioners. That is, Body Weather could be considered a broad spectrum body and mind training, of which *one* of its applications is performance training.

**R:** There are, of course, ethical implications working within an oral /perceptive transmission process which does not have an established set of criteria. You could argue, that as neither Body Weather nor Butoh can be considered form based movement disciplines, their systematic understanding is reliant on the transference from one body directly to another, which brings in the question of individual interpretation. I understand that, for example, Min Tanaka decided to suspend his open Body Weather training camps at his farm in Japan for several years as he felt that students were coming to learn and immerse themselves in a physical training process, then taking their experiences of training and quickly disseminating the practice, without really developing a clear understanding of it in their own bodies.

**M:** While Body Weather has been developed by many practitioners in different ways, only a small pocket of literature exists on the discipline. I have come to understand that one clear principle of Body Weather practice is based upon open communication between practitioners. Certainly, this has to some extent, discounted the professionalism and depth of Body Weather knowledge. I believe that some notion of screening is essential in order to maintain a practice of integrity.

**R:** So, could you talk a little about your transition from, if you like, a student and receiver of an established set of training principles, through Tess's training and your evolution as an independent dance practitioner and workshop facilitator in relation to our shared process, through the work of *ROCKface*?

**M:** While my practice has developed strongly through facilitating Body Weather training in London for the past four years, the advent of independent movement/performance research outfits *InVivo* (2007) and *ROCKface* (2005) have perhaps been the most fundamental to

developing an independent language, which has come about through an interrogation of some of the basic principles of Body Weather. There is a kind of deconstruction of the form which is necessary in order to then construct my -or, in the case of *ROCKface*, our- language.

**R:** It occurs to me that both Body Weather and Butoh as emergent practices, *do* require material evidence in the form of identified terms of engagement- hence our continued investigation, through *ROCKface* into the development of a language- a set of definitions, or performance vocabulary, that can be used to define the body's relation to the particular landscape or environment. Certainly, the initial construction of a physical language within *ROCKface* is shaped directly out of the conditions of the landscape we have inhabited- namely, Dartmoor National Park. Our challenge within the research is how to sustain a movement vocabulary beyond its initiation within a particular environment, working in an immersive experiential mode. And through corporeal memory- a kind of muscular articulateness which eventually becomes embedded *through* the training. Does any of this resonate with the work you were doing with *INVIVO*?

**M:** In *INVIVO* we are a diverse mix of Polish, Italian, Brazilian and Australian, so everything requires translation and a distillation of language at some level. I never used words like density, weight, mass, volume, gravity, I use only the words to do with *immediacy* – speed, length, distance (words close to the image) – those properties are tiered in terms of being accessible to an open or 'available' body – definitely speed is the first thing that we can grasp but it's also the first thing to go, when we are trying to get deeper in terms of being able to match properties. It's not about

matching something else. In order to work as agents – we can draw on what we already know – walking, running, jogging...

The other thing I was working with was opposing forces that co-exist in order to be there – like gravity doesn't exist by itself. We don't get around like amoebas - we hold ourselves at some level. And that is the agency – being able to extend that agency to hold your foot down on the ground while you are doing the circles, and having your roots down on the ground. The input matches the output.

**R:** Then, it is about a division of labour in the body – how you are able to stabilise your left arm in order to maintain a grounded left heel – instead of going with the supposed intention of kinetic organised or ordered logic. However, it is more than simply an efficient division of labour when you are working in relation to an unstable environment. How to find a dynamic interchange with the situation you find yourself in.

**M:** Initially the MB work assists in terms of trying to be open in the activities is that first level of

understanding of re-creating speed - the pedestrian walking body working at different speeds – working *against* the anatomy of the body. Again, identifying this openness then enables us to transform our perception of the limits of our anatomical structure in relation to constantly changing environments.

**M:** (*cont'd*) Yet, in order to be able to transform you have to be able change both your relationship to your environment and change your relationship with yourself...

We tend to view this in terms of a loss of power - not in a negative way – just giving something up. And that's about as far as the work goes in relation to psychology – because it doesn't matter what it is - if you can give it up it is no longer an issue. It's a question of blurred boundaries because I am suggesting we can adapt all the time according to the needs or appropriateness of the situation. Because I feel that that is where transformation lies.

**R:** Exactly- you've just put your finger on the difference between this work and many somatic based education methods – here, there is a sense of intuitive anatomy– where transformation also demands an alteration of our perception of what the body is. The aim of the training then is towards developing an *adaptable and available body* – in order to be able to access the sensorial stimuli in any pre-existing properties of an environment – and change your relation to your environment – and in doing so, your relationship to yourself. I do think the application isn't as relevant actually. Rather than an available body we are talking about an adaptable body.

**M:** In some sense then, the aim of the MB work is to create an open body as this is a pre-requisite to developing an *adaptable body*. An adaptable body is the body as a *constantly transforming entity* – like the weather. The application of this can equally be in fact daily life as in the creative process.

Further Information can be accessed at

<http://www.rachsweeney.webs.com>

<http://www.transnationalterrain.blogspot.com>

<http://www.orrandsweeney.blogspot.com>

<http://www.camerabodyplace.blogspot.com>