

Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund
c/o Anna Carlisle and Irls Tomlinson

Stephanie McMann
London, April 2017

Dear LUTSF,

I am writing to thank you for your support from the Lisa Ullman Travelling Fund which allowed me to navigate my way across the Irish sea to embark on the beginning and important moment in the development and progression of my practice as a dance artist. Receiving generous support from the LUTSF at the early stage of this process was a wonderful aid in the longer-term sustainability of my current work as a professional dance artist. It supported a rare and so greatly desired moment that not only stood alone as a rich and fulfilling week of collaboration with self and other, but also to ameliorate where I stand now as a practicing dance artist living in the UK.

In the week of the 9th-15th November 2015 friend and colleague Helka Kaski and I successfully applied for and were generously awarded a residency at Dance Limerick, Ireland. We began with the intention to plunge into the unknown and unearth our shared mutual desire to take stock of our working professional histories both, giving space to and with ourselves as well as through the other. To 'locate the shared, and expand from that to a shared "language", a way to perform and express our bodies of knowledge.' (Helka Kaski, 2017)

Due to Dance Limerick's schedule, our two-week residency was reduced to one in with an eye to reschedule the second week at the cost of Dance Limerick. The intention was to return and complete the second week at a moment which suited all. Unfortunately and quite unbelievably (retrospectively) due to the busy and changeable nature of our working lives Helka and I have been unable to find a common week to return. Whilst frustrating, this is also reflective of where we are as artists and unveils a pressing point in the priority of our working situations. I also am left with the desire to continue where we have left off and acknowledge the conversation between us has not ceased. If anything the conversation is still increasingly encouraging and while I have been vivified by this reminiscence of our work together I am also excitedly aware how present it is for me and how the conversation and will is still there for me and Helka.

Helka and I first began working together through work for mysteryskin (Roberta Jean, a long-term collaborator). We had met many times before and worked within the same community for years, but this work brought us together as artists with shared understandings of practice and also developed between us a close and

generous friendship. This shared desire to spend time away from the more known ways of working and pure enjoyment in each other's company led to our initial application. The majority of the residency was spent noticing how much information we've tended to over the years and that it is within us, marking a moment to finally provide it a bit of space to breath and realise itself without pressure on rigid outcome. Uncovering the invisible layers that inform us in all we bring ourselves to without really *having* to make sense of it. I acknowledge this as being then and still being a complete rarity for me and my working practice.

We spent a fruitful week in the beautiful church-converted studio, practicing together, alone, reading, writing, listening, talking, laughing, leading and following. Our time in Limerick was packed full of exchanges not only with each other but we took an active engagement with our surroundings and the locality of Limerick. Landing after an extremely bumpy flight notably because Shannon Airport (Limerick's closest airport) is situated on the west coast of Ireland with the Atlantic winds vigorously sweeping in, we took a beautiful winding coach journey to the historic city of Limerick. This being the second time we had been in Limerick together, it felt like coming back to an old friend. It's a challenging city but brimming with culture, music and community vibrancy. Over the course of our stay we went to gallery openings, historical performances denoting relationships with Ireland and Mexico, spent time listening to a whole cadre (or pint in Irish collective nouns) of local Irish musicians, many long walks traversing the city and we also cooked and broke bread together everyday. All of my days were punctuated by making the most of Limericks pay-as-you-go cycle system. These evenings were mostly spent cycling in the blustery wind and rain which became a beautiful highlight of the experience; a daily tête-à-tête with the local climate and badge of honour for Limerick life.

So whilst most of the memories lie in a particularly open space of reflecting on the time spent with Helka and myself and observing the spaces we were making for ourselves as artists, spaces we've not allowed to flourish thus far- it is also crucial to recognise the importance of being immersed in a different culture of community and arts and the impact of this and our shared interest of getting stuck-in to all it offered.

I am extremely thankful for this support but also for the patience and allowances LUTSF has shown in lieu of the fact the report has come in dramatically later than hoped. The wish had been to be able to report on the second week of research also, but as we are not able to complete this yet, I am keen to find other ways to share feedback from this potential week in the hope of continuing to speak about this development of practice. Although this report is late, the ability to have had time to reflect on what is an on-going process has been extremely valuable and reflecting upon what happened and where it sits now is an extremely rare but rich process.

Yours sincerely,

Stephanie McMann

Limerick Residency November 2015
Practice Research with Helka Kaski

Report April 2017 - two years later

I acknowledge the two within this project but I will aim to write from my personal view, both considering present reflections and acknowledging the initial notes and thoughts which were recorded at the time.



This project marked the first time I gave space to my practice and to thoughts on practice itself. I allowed my practice space, time and energy which began the journey through realising what had previously been the private and unacknowledged by me. Travelling to Ireland represented more than just a space to consider and physically process these ideas, it provided a space away from my known self and known community. Taking ourselves seriously together anew. The uncertainty of navigating the streets of the city was felt in equal measure in the studio, navigating new un-pickings and new ways of considering what we do in an unfamiliar environment and yet vibrant in its own way.

I am going to use the term practice a lot, the deepening understanding of this term initially came from time spent quietly alone with it jotted down scrawlings and research. I am aware the word practice is used a lot in dance, with both critics and enthusiasts of the term. Dance artist Chrysa Parkinson is a huge advocate for the word practice (<https://vimeo.com/26763244>). I relate wholeheartedly to this way of thinking. For the work I do, as a dancer who has spent the majority of her career working for and with others' ideas, projects and manifestations, the term practice became crucial as it begins to point towards what I do daily, what I do for a living, what I've been doing since I was a child. I always have it with me, it doesn't have any boundaries, edges or sizes, it is a growing landscape. It has become a part of articulating the inarticulable. It is the thread which ties

together being a dance artist-writer-performer-improvisatory practitioner-teacher. Solo practice has always been present for me, but has mainly existed in captured moments alone away from a studio or included in persona warm-ups or time spent at home.

I realise that the fact it is difficult to define is possibly Liberating as there is an option to become something other, never having to truly settle, which represents a lot of what I do and how I feel about what I do. But this also currently suggests whether its inability to define itself means it begins to disempower the role or the voice of the dancer. Perhaps this explores the distribution of value, suggesting there can be an assumption that maturing as a dance artist means beginning to transition into becoming a choreographer, the transition from manual labour to management as Parkinson states (<http://audiostage.guerrillasemiotics.com/chrysa-parkinson-the-value-of-dance-as-practice/>) or indeed, concept trumping crafting. Resisting this pathway is something I began to notice, or maybe it's challenging this pathway, or maybe it's following this pathway without realising. It became a key component of this residency to explore the pathway on which I found myself. Without huge desire to begin choreographic research, I was deeply interested to begin self practice research and improvisatory investigations to uncover what is already there. I wanted to expose and focus attention on the layers of work and process that have been crafting themselves throughout all these years of professional dance and performance practice.

For both me and Helka, this was a shared desire. Finding it in one another created an exciting entry point.

I/we began with questions.

What can happen with the starting point of ourselves and then each other? Dotting the lines between what has come before in our work, what remains in our thinking/moving/personal archives? What excites and feeds my practice, research, people, resources etc.? what if I am enough? What if we are enough? How can we access the methodologies of collaboration and study why 'something works'?

Developing a practice: what we did

We began with a focus on ourselves and each other. This was enough to excite the union into fruition and begin delving into and sharing of practices. Practices we acknowledged have been so deeply woven into our professional careers so far, but also with a particular aim to uncover *what remains*. A yielding to allow the practice to reveal itself. Both having a shared working history with improvisation, this felt like the house that began to frame our explorative home of working.

Practically we had the delight of working in the huge church-converted studio/performance space, both overwhelmingly beautiful and very cold in the month of November. It came with its own sense of history and warmth; the energy of holding and supporting the Limerick dance scene as we know it, present and with its own past histories. We worked in the space all but one day, giving ourselves a day in the more modern (and dramatically cozier) 'dance studio'. Days were spent arriving to the studio mid-morning, after a hearty breakfast warmly made in the artist flat Helka was staying in. We brought many books, extra jumpers

and computers filled with music and footage to share. We began considering our time quite freely then realised structuring ourselves would be useful. We usually started individually, preparing for the day; note-taking, reading and the odd venture into the space to acknowledge *today's body*, before coming together to reflect.



We talked a lot. We acknowledged our similar pathways and similar questions, considering our voice within other's work, how to support ourselves artistically as well as financially. We spoke about our experiences of the variety of work we have been a part of, sharing stories, reflections and even *phrases* of ideas/movements. The vastness of the huge space created a sense that anything was possible and nothing off limits to share, explore and perhaps disregard. We spoke a lot about not knowing, not having to find an answer or even a question. We acknowledged that we have not had much time to just sit with ourselves, to let the not knowing inform rather than working to an external idea. On reflection it felt like a self-run retreat, to move and be moved without judgement or 'considered' form, to relate to another emotionally and physically. We spoke of habits and their ability to hang around, tied to our history. We spoke of shared uncertainty and the pressure to consider framing and structuring of our practice. We also reminded ourselves to let go of where this material we were present with was going and that not doing so is perhaps practised habitual behaviour. What if we followed what was there with us, within us?

As well as talking, we listened a lot, we could genuinely take time to hear each other and notice how much we share. We allowed friendship to also feed the process, with no judgment. We did a lot of observing and filming each other. Helka introduced an idea of making *self-portraits*, building and testing scores. This also engaged us with the practice of performing, something common in our histories. We danced for each other then lay down and allowed thoughts to rush in, to experience the after moment and ask, what has happened for us? Where are we left? With no rush to move past this moment, to deal with the present and not yet the next. Allowing the process to find its own feet. Time to simply gaze and wonder building connections which hadn't yet been allowed to flourish.

I noted at the time that while this process was extremely fulfilling, and now realise it's what

became the most nourishing of experiences, it also felt intimidating at times. I noted a creeping in of self-imposed pressure to organise my explorations into something more concrete right away. As if to define or demonstrate my practice, in a clear repeatable manner, or because it is the expected and known next step of *choreographic* development that Chrysa Parkinson speaks of. Confessing this to Helka and noting a shared pressure, we came to realise how important it was to sit with the muddy stage and the bored of self. This is why we were there. Why try to find clarity at this point? This was time to abolish any sense of rush. It also allowed me to realise that I enjoy working from a place of open-ended questions, and this is the most responsive and present space in which I can be. So why try to struggle to find and articulate in words what I am figuring out in movement? That is why I move. That is my clarity at present.



Scores

We practiced many scores, both alone and together. We made scores for each other, performed them for each other and reflected together. We practiced a combined score that was made up of personal questions and physicalities that we had been dealing with all week, both individually and alone. This proved to be extremely fulfilling for the pair of us. It touched on something which both remarked on a practice of mutual mentorship, experiencing what both the self and other were busy with. Fundamentally this began to illuminate what I am interested in. Delving into enough of something known whilst uncovering landscapes that are still completely unknown.

Score to get me going

Be in space

Contemplate beginnings, slowly

Continue slowly into slow imaginings.

Score for Helka from Steph

Arrange yourself in space- turn and see us

Move and close the fictional curtains (this time and experience is yours)

----What are you thinking?----

Imagine a hierarchical structure- in whatever context you like.

--Respond through your bones, through your eyes, through your flesh, through your joints, through your skin.

What if your spine feels really silly?

Now---what now---how do you respond now?

Exit the space however you wish

Combined score

Measure the length of silence

Using the feeling of concrete, be firm with our imagination, let something appear- see it/be it clearly (can be broken by jittering)

In-completed actions, whilst seeing everything all of the time

Recall past phrases and try to do them in reverse, while changing the orientation of your nose.

Reflections

Written at the time:

Standing, pausing, noticing. The ground, angles, concrete. What is my pathway- when do I function? What is enough? Am I too afraid to set parameters for myself? Am I afraid to fail?

What is enough for me? Does subject create reason? Purpose? A justification? Would a justification explain my reasoning for doing what I do? Do I not want to be found out?

I am fascinated the being in place and the being in present. The choice we make.

Try, dance like you would never dare to. Is it still you? Are you embodied? Do you desire to be embodied? Are you afraid it can't possibly be embodied if you just mess around or try what you're scared of trying?

Monkey mind, start something and then change, then change, keep restless.

As well as this residency being a deeply rich and rare opportunity to be with my dancing, I also observed the critical thoughts I was imposing on myself. These are still very much present but this was the first time I articulated them for another. I noted the harshness I can apply to myself. However this time talking these things through was vital to observe as I could hear similar self-criticism coming from Helka. By witnessing the practice she put into space I was captivated by engaging with her process and dumbfounded she shared similar thoughts when I saw such craftsmanship, intelligence and evident work in and around the space. This felt like a huge eureka moment. Why spend time judging? It doesn't need space for comment just yet, it needs space to just exist. I believe I began to give oxygen to the idea that in order for my practice to exist it needed to find a form, a way of 'showing' it to somebody. This was the exact opposite of what I had originally intended for this residency. Through the process of sharing with Helka I learned a valuable lesson of acknowledging self judgement, facing it and moving past it without placing too much time or energy on it.

Having this time to process allowed me to realise how extremely illuminating this residency

was. I feel I am used to quick exchanges of process, transmuting in and out of very differing modes of working and modes of performing. Limerick revealed that I find joy in collaboration, in fact this feels essential to my interest in being an artist. We danced and we talked, it happened and it disappeared but left even more on its departure.

It is clear to understand we had only just begun, we had begun to reveal what was there, including a lot of complex thoughts to do with self practice and its placement within rich histories of work and exploring the embodied intelligence witnessed in each other. But what I am left with most of all is the fact we were even there prioritising the space and time for ourselves exposed that we are enough and more time is needed to keep opening these observations. Now we are in a place to focus on some of these more specific strands together. This time in Limerick allowed me to unearth and begin to articulate the deeper considerations of my dance practice which I am still enticed by currently. The hope will be to continue to find time to come together to continue these conversations of self and other, now with perhaps a more felt sense of ownership.

