
A POINT OF VIEW: SOLO COLLABORATION

Jodie McNeilly Summer 2009

For Henri Bergson, aesthetic beauty is expressed by nature and suggested by the artist. Suggestion is more affective than our direct experience with nature alone. Here, a reversal in the traditional order is entailed: one must study the artist and their work in order to understand nature for its beauty. It is the artist and not nature that hypnotizes and lulls us with their rhythms.

Bergson's idea resonates with my own thinking about the choreographer's process and practice and is elaborated by notions of the aesthetic that extends beyond beauty. When concerning ourselves with research driven choreography, what can be said about the self, human relations, and the world we constitute as political, social, technological, religious and cultural? What insight is gained by studying the artist in their field of practice and production? In a milieu where product speaks for intention, 'K.P.I.s' valued over nascent development and interrogative play, the opportunity to investigate a choreographic idea, deepen one's practice, look to one's past for inspiration, cultural identity and reimagined possibilities, is a transgressive mode within cultural production. Research is a necessary act within a system of distribution that ostensibly creeds cultural diversity and creative emergence, yet fails to support in a consistent and sustainable manner. To observe and critically reflect upon several artists' practices from outside as Academe and Artist (a somewhat scornful combination in this Country) is an inalienable gift. That we are no longer concerned with beauty the way metaphysicians once were, but seek an experience of art for other reasons; research is – if entertaining the Bergsonian line – the moment to pay attention to as artist, peer and academic. In this essay, I draw together the well-articulated intentions and findings of six artists; extending the 'what happened', 'why' and 'how' toward a wider discussion about the role of research in activating and sustaining an independent choreographer's livelihood. I attempt to unsettle thinking about how the choreographer as artist and researcher approaches innovation and sustainability, and identify shared conceptions of significance that a life of dancing produces.

The Critical Path responsive program offered to New South Wales, Australia based choreographers provides space, money, technical support and a wide berth for transdisciplinary research. Practitioners

are provided with a concentrated period of time to engage with their research questions, document, undertake inter-textual/disciplinary study, create and refine their methodologies, exchange with collaborators, make things with their hands, record and edit footage, share with their peers, strategically plan a future direction and – most importantly – take risks and make mistakes.

The responsive program for the first half of 2009 included a series of projects focused upon 'solo' practice. Whether working in isolation or with others, each of the residencies emphasised developing individual choreographic processes. As a non-solo artist who works collaboratively in a team to make group dances, I am interested in how the solo artist structures their 'aleness' in periods of practice and making, and how and who are involved in 'feedback processes'? A Western understanding of feedback processes derives from a scientific model, where the movement of information between two or more independent persons starts from a linear action and reaction logic, perhaps creating a reticulating loop – more complex as an iterative process. Asking a bodyweather artist developing a solo about how and who gives feedback, they speak reverently of the spaces in which they work. The walls, floor, built structures, memories and potentialities of place provide feedback processes as 'collaborators' in this system of training and making. What a beautiful thought. From this I posit solo practice as a collaborative act, reliant on an independent source for support and reflection. A solo artist is a collaborator seeking others for their aesthetic becoming, whether material or immaterial, animate or inanimate. Self-sufficiency, independence, one's internal dialogue and own histories are ameliorated in and by the communities – however small – with which their attention is gathered. By drawing together the various research experiences of six independent artists, I consider solo research and practice as a collaborative act.

THE DANCE INFORMATION IN MY BODY IS MINE

Jane McKernan 2009

Jane McKernan and Lizzie Thomson share a history. Their practice together started in the Dell Brady Ballet School studios as wee tots pointing their toes toward a future that they now retrospectively understand as having careered into “remarkably parallel tracks” (McKernan and Thomson 2009: 2) As the genesis for looking at their respective histories in dance training, practice and performance, Jane and Lizzie hoped to construct for their residency a “supportive and safe infrastructure where they can appropriate, collide, assimilate or reinterpret each other’s work” (McKernan and Thomson 2009: 2). Despite the congruencies between ‘tracks’, Jane and Lizzie have had a different focus since the pink tights and ‘showing their best’. Lizzie is a solo artist who has worked closely with Australian born International Choreographer and Improvisor Ros Crisp. For Lizzie the past few years have been a cumulative period of influences from a range of practitioners in collaborative scenarios with varying outcomes and a transitional period towards creating solo work. The residency provided an opportunity to deepen existing structures and movement scores, including the antithetical score history and no history. For Jane, she has pursued dance predominantly through her work with “The Fondue Set”.

Juxtaposing the history and no history scores meant Lizzie could address the information in her body “in relation to the bigger dance history as starting points for investigating ways to generate and frame dance.” (Thomson 2009: 2) Considering several traditions from dance history, Jane and Lizzie looked at: the Ballets Russes; the ballets of Swan Lake, Giselle, The Rite of Spring; Graham, Cunningham; release technique and improvisation. Acknowledging that the residency was a rich and limitless “space for experimentation”, Lizzie was enabled to ‘make by hand’. Through wielding a paintbrush, assembling flats from cardboard, and dressing in character as Pablo Picasso, Lizzie (now affectionately referred to as “Pablo”) was liberated from self-judgment about her painting and stagecraft abilities. She recreated the scenography and costuming from The Rite of Spring. A parade of self-ridicule and fun, Lizzie understands this strategy of playfulness as a necessary counterpoint to the “sincerity”

and “seriousness” of dance, while affirming dance as an efficacious way to respond to the world and reflect on one’s subjectivity.

Drawing on aspects of Paul Virilio’s writings and earlier study with Julyen Hamilton (Spain), Lizzie reinterpreted the no history score through recreations of ballet history. No history looks specifically at breaking with one’s habitual, historical movement through resistance, rapid decision-making and spontaneity.

[I]f you felt you knew what you were going to do (i.e. how you were going to move next) you weren’t allowed to do it, because that was making plans for the future or relying on your past movements with a kind of flow or follow-through, so you had to quickly change your intention and do something unplanned. (Thomson 2009: 3)

Messing with the flow and logics of moving, Lizzie disrupted entrenched movement patterns in the creation of new pathways, motifs and thinking about what dance could be. Despite Virilio’s diagnosis of a world in acceleration rather than progression, Lizzie adopts speed in the Virilioian sense to “confuse” the habitual and familiar. Here, theory and practice are composite bedfellows; a union constituted through extrapolation and application.

Predominately a solo artist, Lizzie finds it more interesting to collaborate with a score than another person. Moreover, she is not interested in creating group choreographies, a reason not stemming from misanthropic or economic motivation. Both Jane and Lizzie’s work with Ros Crisp involved processes of self-bodily attention. Choreographic investigations were based in one’s own moving body. The feedback is self-circulatory, re attending embedded information, accumulated in the bodymind over time. Ideas are thrown on the floor at another time, for another reason - altogether elsewhere. These strategies for solo practice expand my understanding of collaboration. Solo making seen as a collaborative act and not a hermetic practice transcends collaborative artmaking associated with models of devising. The temporal nature of collaboration can be seen in one’s investment to engage with their embodied histories, from their very first plie – or more originarily as an embryo, to drawing on aspects of dance history. Dancing with historic figures and their

ideas as posthumous moderators is a form of collaboration. Reflection and generation of new material through antithetical or interpretive devices imposed on these ideas rejuvenated from history creates complex relationships not to be dismissed. (This author's collaborations with Alwin Nickolais and Robert Wilson are a definite point in case). A collaborator does not need to be an individuated bodily presence in the here and now, sitting next to you in the rehearsal room privy to the maddening insomnia or distraction that drags you from the everyday when possessed with kinetic images of affective kingdoms. These mythologised figures are great for bouncing ideas off, offering reference points and influencing choices. Despite the bodily absence of a spectral alterity - for a decision (swayed or not) ultimately emerges from the self in a deliberation process - any influence (chimerical or concrete) on a decision is a process of negotiation, even when your independent source ('collaborative participant') is dead.

Capped as Pablo Picasso. Clad in felt as Joseph Beuys of Fluxus fame. The girls were able to situate and seriously consider their individual questions in a fabricated and fun context. Jane's investigations considered the "real" here and now of the dancing body working, while at the same time seeing what the body alludes to beyond the dance: how a dancing body suggests something beyond itself and not just for expression.

From the style of motel room where you might witness the fugitive anxieties of a character played by an ageing Dennis Hopper, Jane (in Baker City, Oregon) talks to the camera about her intentions, interests and findings from her shared residency with Lizzie. Jane's interest in solo practice is motivated by a desire to distinguish a performing identity away from her "multiple other" in The Fondu Set, and to engage in processes that seek to interrogate her interest in the relationship between bodies and objects within dance. Jane saw the residency as a way to develop an ongoing solo practice with Lizzie while retaining separate research questions and a different style of work. This particular research model intends a framework for ongoing solo practice where the dialogue is grounded within a familiar language system and movement vocabulary, yet investigates their questions through different methods. Unlike improvisational artists working together with similar structures and scoring techniques in order to retain their idiosyncratic performance style, or employing

methods of 'making strange' one's own practice through another discipline or artform, an ongoing (rather than one-off) solo exchange practice that asks different questions and frames different objectives for what is produced offers a distinctive form of solo collaboration. The question remains, how will this continue to be pursued?

Jane draws on performance art to think about the role of objects and costume, positing that a "costume is a costume" and not simply a function of the dance (McKernan 2009). Thinking about objects and costumes in their own right in performance relationships can multiply signification beyond dance's often-unscrupulous subsumption. Jane also considers the patriotic body, political traditions of the body uniformly 'dressed up', trained up through movement emulating machine logic: individuals in synchronous rhythms operating the body politic as singular parts of a whole. In effect, affecting political indoctrination of the soul through unison movement en masse. From a movement level, Jane wants to reflect on the "singular amongst the mass to evoke a sense of unison movement and unison choreography" (McKernan 2009) asking: what of the rise of patriotism in Australia? How could this type of patriotic body be dressed and moving? Jane dances with an imagined group to the "stirring pomposity" of Vivaldi. It is a "dance investigation, not pantomime; embodying the movement, rather than showing" (McKernan 2009). By choreographing this singular body in an imagined larger group she can understand "what it is doing". This appears to be the next stage in developing her inquiry.

THE BODY SINGS, THE VOICE MOVES

Ashley Dyer and Tony Osborne came together to formally examine questions interrogating the relationship between movement and singing. They began the process by asking:

What are some possible choreographic relationships between the moving body and the sung voice? How might one sing the moving body and/or move the singing body? How might movement/voice be experienced as one and the same thing when moving/singing and or when watching? How might movement/voice be experienced as two things for either the mover/singer or the watcher? (Dyer and Osborne 2009: 2)

Ashley and Tony were interested in challenging and/or reaffirming their individual assumptions about how they simultaneously move and sing. Further, they wished to problematise this shared experience in exchange with collaborators Amanda Stewart, Nalina Wait and Tamarah Tossey possessing voice and/or movement backgrounds. Their methodology consisted of taking prior assumptions of practice involving the voice and body in a moving singing/sounding relationship into a series of scored activities on the floor. Working systematically through various scores, thematising voice or movement as single focus or in combinations of simultaneous and split multi focuses, their formulated strategies were presupposed by an active exchange of 'doing and watching'.

From the 'watching' they were able to integrate positive feedback processes, identifying what and how experiences emerged from imposing parameters of a 'choreographic or stylistic' nature. Watching from outside and within enabled a generative process of analysis. Assumptions were problematised for each practitioner about how they moved and used voice in structured and authentic frameworks, thus embodying new ways unfamiliar and/or formerly unnoticed. For all artists, the collaborative relationship disclosed or introduced something new to their practice. The inhibited voice as a vulnerable dimension of the dancers was gently provoked to explicate not just the production of sound while moving, but to discover new choreographic possibilities.

For Nalina, it was “the movement potential of the resonating chambers of the body” ; and for Tamara, the “incentive to explore durations on the beat” after noticing a “tendency toward a metronome” and habit of fast movement. For Vocalist Amanda Stewart, the residency provided “new tools, forms and ideas” to influence her solo work, and provided a rubric of understanding for future collaborations with artists whose skill platform differed from hers: a case of interdisciplinary exchange. The residency was a relief in its creative and experimental focus, providing outcomes refreshingly far from the polish and specificity of production and publication. For this, Amanda was most appreciative.

The outcomes of this residency resonate with my perspectives on collaborative exchange in a research context. Ashley outlines an important insight with regard to how the transmission of research processes for choreographic research can be useful to the individual artist engaged with a Critical Path program, more potently through their participation, articulation and evaluation of their research. Ashley suggests that by “cataloguing diverse research processes” and compiling ‘recommendations’ and ‘models’ initiated in the responsive program, artists could be assisted in developing frameworks for future practice-based research and thinking about their ‘findings’ within research.

- 1)How the research has developed one’s understanding of ideas – both somatically and verbally
- 2)Choreographic strategies for generating, editing and shaping material
- 3)Developing the seeds of material that goes on to develop a work of some kind

The three aspects of ideation, composition and performance development (conceptual and concrete) requires a system for continual communication and reification. This is important not only for the artist and the propagation of their project for further research, a new mode of practice, compositional tools, publication, grant writing or strategy for production, but to the community within which the research is legitimated. The question of legitimation is a curly one, and it becomes more complex in an environment where little funding is reserved for

the diversity of cultural production.

Ashley's suggestion for sharing strategies as exemplars for efficacious research is a generous and necessary step to ensure that research is valued positively. And that the study and discussion of artists and their research processes continues to say something about Art's - and more fervently Dance's - responsiveness to the contemporary world.

When academic collusion in artist research is a viable engagement, the collaborative process extends beyond the closed project to a wider discursive community. Criticality, observation, and a range of theoretical perspectives – when invited – provoke and irritate commonly held assumptions, pushing practice and making beyond habitus. Often only other people can do that. Often, it is those from outside the experience that provide the most insight. As artists it is often difficult to be held accountable by critical frameworks, or by observations and experiences reified by theory.

There is no necessity to drag theoretical concepts onto the floor in the name of research for the hope that the practice will deepen or be more sophisticated; nor to listen to academics talking and writing through numerous theoretical frameworks to understand the how, the why, and the what. The rejection of theoretical elaborations about how to touch one's toes, borne through healthy skepticism, is a necessary imperative of research to resist theories that skew work in the name of discourse.

And

Yet, the availability of theory with concepts ready to grab, analyses for pragmatic purposes, reflections, and thought that is deepened through bodily experiences emergent

within the everyday, all provide potent potentialities for practice and making. (McNeilly 2009)

FLYING SOLO?

Body weather artist Linda Luke received Critical Path's three-month Fellowship to undertake research on a new solo project about homeless youth in Australia. Linda draws on her experiences of living in crisis accommodation and being a Ward of the State while as a young teen. The Fellowship offers artists the opportunity to slowly develop a work one dedicated day per week over a three-month period, with use of the downstairs research room. The fellowship gave Linda time to think about the frameworks for what is to be a much larger project. Her days could be spent reading, researching the Internet, working slowly to document movement material, and enlist the help of an outside eye. Months before Linda received a dossier of reports detailing her time as a Ward of the State. The residency gave her the opportunity to finally read and sit with her emotional responses to these documents that a shorter more concentrated research period would not have enabled. Linda reflects.

There was indeed much sadness in the first few weeks, not so much a personal sadness of my own history but a sadness that we live in such a world where sometimes, adults are simply unable to be responsible for children, for a myriad of reasons and circumstances (Luke 2009: 1)

Linda admits the difficulties in working for an eight-hour period at the end of an already busy week. She found that six hours was an easier slab of time to remain concentrated on the work. Some days were faced with more enthusiasm and focus than others. Some days felt like pulling teeth. This negotiation of when and how we work is an extremely important feature of research, and sustaining an art practice generally. It is not simply a question of possessing discipline, rigour, or clarity – for Linda is one of the most disciplined artists I know - but is more about how we avail time to the non-productive periods; and remitting value to the 'not-wanting', and/or failures in always being able to access and be productive with the work. Can we not celebrate the values of inactivity? The problem is not with periods of

perceived low motivation – as beautiful things can spring forth from a melancholic, frustrated haze - but the anxiety that we develop from the pressure of so little time with so little space. The dearth of affordable space for dance makers in Sydney is epidemic. During the reasonably well-attended forum for the responsive artists (of whom I write about here), discontentment appeared implicit in some of the questions responding to the ‘non-use’ of space during Linda’s residency. I found it symptomatic of the problems that lack of space creates for the dance community in this City and certainly not a personal attack on Linda. My point and/or question is: what does this mean for research when a community questions the relationship an artist might have with their use of allotted space? Research is not creative development; nor is it training, rehearsal, practice or production. It has pockets of non-activity. It avails time for thinking and repose from other paid labour. Research has many stages. A project may be the preparatory engagement with ideas that seeds and/or initiates a future project; it may be the continuation and development of an ongoing research question. The project – in its resolve – may not lead anywhere. Can the Community support this when so little infrastructure exists for development toward production, that is, enough spoils to annul the skeptic heat targeted at research? The dilemma is not easily resolved. Linda interrogated movement material from her memories as a teen: “notating key words and energetics...expanding key movements... [through] different speeds, tensions and scales” (Luke 2009: 2). Various imagery such as “the quality of rain, or a knife slicing meat or the rhythm of a butterfly in a garden” was meditated upon, permitting Linda to “bag up segments of the material” (Luke 2009: 2).

Dwelling outside; the body as shelter.

A significant impact on Linda’s approach to the research was working with Dancer and Video Artist Cyrille Nerovique. Together they filmed movement material in various outdoor locations in the City and Country. For Linda, this brokered a fresh model for accessing memories and environments. She surfaced intermittently from the rubble of self-insisted detritus that builds up over the months of isolation, provoking the material to form new energies and move in uncharted directions. Working outside in select locations raised questions: how different does theatre function from a public site in the construction of a work? During the performance sharing at Critical

Path a woman becomes concerned about Linda's perceived loitering at an unlocked fence: a fence that constructs a public/private boundary between the harbour and foreshore. The woman is unaware of the audience and interrupts Linda to inquire why she is hovering at the gate. The significance of taking this work out into locations during development away from the black box and its preordained readings is that it provided Linda a more constructive framework with which to question the content, beyond the offer of staging possibilities. Despite the fruits of Cyrille and the camera's collaborative displacement of Linda's experiences as 'solitary worker', she was able to notate the "nuances and sensibilities" that arose in repeated processes over time, exciting her about mining untapped material; the tantalising prospect of creation.

Linda's future vision is vast, but conservatively planned. The residency as "springboard" for process, practice, production and personal reconciliation will see her develop a full-length solo work from a "series of small and longer dance works in a variety of contexts" (Luke 2009: 3). Extending beyond personal story, an exchange will be initiated through workshops and small projects with homeless youth. Not only informing solo development, Linda will be able to listen to others' stories offering creative frameworks for meditation upon their experiences.

ANCESTRAL COLLABORATION

100 CLOAKS: GONE BEFORE DAWN

'te aho tapu'; weaving the first row; binding the tangible with the intangible; in the constant flux between night, earth, sky and whakapapa (lineage).

Victoria Hunt was never alone. Drawing on the transformative principles of Body Weather and Butoh sensibilities she set out to investigate the idea of dancing 100 cloaks, a cloak carrying within it 'ancestral prestige' (mana). A key statement: "being danced by the space", Victoria asks: "what is dance? What is transformation? What is being danced by the space? (Hunt 2009).

Form

Spirit

Freedom

Responsibility

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Beyond the wall of words and pictures, Victoria lies naked in the black space: “settling cerebral processes to connect with a different sense of the body” (Hunt 2009). An unfortunate situation cuts Victoria’s residency short. She is danced by the space in another way. Collaborations extend beyond the artists with whom we choose to work. We collaborate with the institutional and political; within the spaces of applications we prematurely write to speak the unspeakable and define the indefinable. Victoria asks: “what are the authorities in my life? What’s my relationship with that? Where do I place my own authority?” (Hunt 2009) The residency space – for now – provides an unexpected answer. When asked about solo processes Victoria responds:

Haere atu, ka tu ka tangi; haere atu, ka tu tangi
Move, stand and weep; move, stand and weep
Neke neke mai, neke neke mai

“Draw nearer”

The pathway back through ancestral lineage generates a feeling of being summoned. The residency provided the time that was needed to understand that my ancestors occupy a continual state of lament and that this is my ‘inheritance’. Whether I dance the mountain, the river, the ancestress Hinemihi or the legacy of One Hundred Cloaks, unravelling the ‘I’ in form and concept is one of the primordial rows found before weaving ‘te aho tapu’, the first row that binds the tangible with the intangible. In the rich isolation of a solo residency, ‘I’ destroyed the barrier between reaching the kaupapa (purpose) of the residency and the ‘standing place’ from which to generate.

Trauma as a catalyst for upheaval and transformative body was, in retrospect, unwittingly subsumed into my original provocation. Solo process is confrontational. When the environment outside an artistic metamorphosis broke, being danced by the space was inwardly painful and traumatic. Tears were left to drip nearer to some prevailing truth? Exploring a ‘felt realm’ was not explicitly considered part of a methodology for a solo process. With aggressive certainty

it grew into the most important discovery I've had to endure in order to begin to dance my cultural identity (Hunt 2009).

Despite the crisis of expectation and well-laid plans, a new path is forged. Victoria continues to dance with her ancestors in collaboration. Solo collaboration take many forms, this essay has identified only a few. Dancing with scores. Collaborating with spaces, locations and the material structures one encounters. Dancing with one's history or posthumously with figures from dance history: the immaterial, embodied traces; sharing these histories with another, role playing and supportive question asking to broker inquiry as ongoing practice to produce separate paths. To work with the same scores from different backgrounds, asking different questions – again to produce something different and retain ones idiosyncratic style. Our indirect collaborations, the institutions and political super structures that also require "time, research and structure" (Hunt 2009). Solo making with ancestors here and past. In suggesting, in alluding to that which is beyond the dance (McKernan 2009), the solo dance maker is in constant negotiations of collaboration. Emphasising the structure of collaboration within each of these four research projects promotes a potential model for critical and constructive evaluation specific to the relationships that form each process in their genesis and ongoing development. From adequate evaluation a process can be moderated, modified, refined and developed. Discussion of these six solo projects as collaborations offers both discursive and pragmatic utility for future choreographic research processes: our future dance makers. Looking to the work of others is how artists learn. And it is the academic or documenter in collaboration with artists that distils and frames the significance of these processes.

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