
RECAPTURING THE VERTICAL

Nikki Heywood and Heidrun Löhr talk with
Yana Taylor about collaboration in creating a dance animation.

Recapturing the Vertical is a 13-minute animation whose starting point was Nikki Heywood's experience of finding her mother on the floor of her apartment. She had had several falls. Nobody heard her. She was confused and could not get up for about 24 hours until her daughter found her. From a collection of 3,400 still images taken of Nikki by Heidrun Lohr, Heidrun collaborated with Peter Oldham to edit approximately 2,300 of these into a single animated digital video. Gail Priest composed the soundtrack. *Recapturing the Vertical* was first screened in the Drill Hall at Critical Path as part of SEAM September 2009. Here they discuss their experiences of making *Recapturing the Vertical*. Heidrun spoke to me over a journal full of annotated sequences of stills. Nikki spoke with me at the end of a workshop with visiting artists, Carol Brown and Dorita Hannah at Critical Path. YT

Heidrun Löhr: Nikki approached me doing something with her about this situation. Eventually, her mother moved out of the apartment. The apartment was totally empty. The flat was sold. Someone wanted to move in. Because we only had 5 days in December 2008 in the apartment, it was quite spontaneous and intense. We were unsure whether the outcome would be a performance or a selection of photographs. We did not think of an animation at first. We did not have a story. We centered our attention on falling, disorientation and a body moving through the architectural space of an empty apartment. I took a huge amount of photographs while Nikki was improvising and eventually the idea of using these still images to create an animation evolved. I have collaborated with Nikki many times over the years, so there was a lot of trust and playfulness and the communication was quite direct. If we didn't think something was a good idea, we just moved onto something else. It was uncomplicated.

Nikki Heywood: It was an improvisation between Heidrun and I, the camera and the space. I grabbed a limited range of clothing I had to hand. I had begun to be haunted by the idea of somebody being helpless on the floor, locked off needing help with only a wall separating them from the rest of the world in this still interior surrounded by busyness and people.

There was a trauma associated with that, with the shock of opening the door and finding my mother. The ambulance staff told me calls about people who lived alone needing help were common, particularly in the eastern suburbs. It was shocking to realize we live in this busy city and people died alone.

I kept on thinking about the changing of the light moving through the apartment. This directly related to the amount of time my mother was unconscious on the floor. I wanted to make a time based performance about the light but didn't know what form that would take. The process of the work itself was a transformative process that came of an impulse born in trauma – a dark place. Through playing together and Heidrun's understanding there was a transformation from dark to light.

I was interested to take the impact those personal experiences had on my body, to tease out sensations and thoughts that arose around the shock, to put air under them as an artist and put them out into the world to be received. Yet still contain enough of the essence of trauma without enacting trauma.

YT: YOU THINK PEOPLE WATCHING THIS ANIMATION WILL ENGAGE WITH THOSE TRAUMATIC FEELINGS?

NK: No. It has become something else. There was chaos in our play. Heidrun captured something, took these images and created an order out of it. Because of the shortness of time and the immediacy Heidrun and Peter Oldham worked the images in an intuitive way. It has become a piece of poetry. Luckily there was enough distance between the initial events and my desire to do the work so that our play was not too grim or loaded.

HL: It moved away from the original experience. But it is definitely based on the frightening experience when you lose balance and the solidity of the ground we stand on is taken away. It was that experience we were working with. ...

YT: COULD YOU TALK ABOUT THE RELATION BETWEEN A BODY AND THE ARCHITECTURE IN THE ANIMATION?

NK: When I watch the animation I experience a shift from looking at the body in space falling and recovering to seeing the space from the point of view of a body. Now stripped bare, details of a place once a home were revealed. Everything was taken out, including my mother. Traces of her experiences were left – shadows, imprints, and stains on the carpet. All in a space continuously receiving the same light that made the apartment a beautiful space for living in.

There is a pleasure in seeing a familiar space, seeing it being framed and being made captive by the camera with the focus being drawn to the most banal. For example, Heidrun framed me moving in a corridor. A blank wall with only an empty power point that takes up most of the frame. The emptiness of that socket with me moving at a distance is satisfying.

Moving from one still image to the next in the animation has a moment of separation and reconfiguration. We don't see a fluid line as my body shifts from place to place. We see an interrupted line. The way each still keeps separating each moment echoes my distance from the real experience. This is for me about breathing some air into the trauma.

HL: One could still see the indentations of the furniture in the carpet, stains from spilled substances, and the tracks that feet/shoes leave behind over time on their ways around an apartment - there was a strong feeling of absence. In the cross dissolves of the still images the architecture started to move and vibrate. This became a dance in itself. The walls and doorframes lost their solidity. While shooting, I sometimes chose to be in one spot, so the architecture would stay quite still with only the body moving through. At other times I moved quite a bit, changing the angles, and knew that that would create a sense of instability and even of dizziness. There were a lot of creative surprises when we started the editing process. All the possibilities of slowing time down, speeding it up, stopping and starting that we could use in order to evoke a mind that is failing and disorientated.

I once heard that it is more important for human beings to know where they are than who they are. I remember walking slowly with my father when he was 92 in Germany. He had had a few strokes. We stood at one place in the city and he tried to orient himself by all the places he had lived in his life. He pointed and said, "This town is there and that way is the other town". He was terrified of not knowing where he was. I know this from traveling. Waking up with jet lag for a few seconds you don't know where you are. I was interested in showing this terrifying experience when you lose your balance and fall. Alzheimer's and dementia is now much more prominent in our thinking thus it is a subject. Nikki experienced this with her mother and me with my parents. This informed the work but it is not biographical. Rather it reflects on the aging process of an individual frail and alone in a city apartment..

NH: We only had pockets of time in the apartment. These were constraints of necessity and ultimately a catalyst. Because we were not trying to impose a logic or dramaturgy, the dramaturgy happened afterwards. Heidrun showed me sequences and we talked about how we might order those. She also consulted on choices with Peter. There were little accidents in the editing process. For example, when there was a frame frozen on the screen they might not have decided to hold. Once, we all looked back at the monitor of a sequence when I was closing the door that was intended to flow continuously. Peter saw that only my eye could be seen behind the door. So we decided to hold that for a moment.

YT: WHAT POSSIBILITY DOES THE ANIMATION OF THE STILLS OFFER?

HL: Peter Oldham said, "The photographer just wants to make the images move..."

YT: SO WHY NOT MAKE A FILM?

HL: Sometimes in there is a sequence where Nikki walks through the apartment and then she steps back. There are points where her image jumps back in space and time. It gives this little quirk in the movement. Peter suggested we shouldn't convert this into fluid movement of a conventional film. For the viewer, it creates a little jerk

in how you look at something. Nuances become bigger and stand out. Our main interest was to create a distinctive rhythm that supported the rhythm of Nikki's movement in the edit. We tried to find this without all the usual tricky effects like ripple effects etc. Eventually the transitions stayed simple. Sometimes the dissolves are slowed then sped up.

NK: There is a surprising stillness about the film. At the same time Heidrun has captured an incredible degree of flow. This is as much about her eye as anything else. It was exciting to have someone else with their camera receive and take on the idea. This goes back to my initial notion to make something about time lapse. But I didn't think it would work as a film. It needed to be done some other way and I didn't know how. When I talked to Heidrun she was excited about the idea. It was an opportunistic meeting of her skills and mine, the idea and our history together. I could trust her implicitly.

HL: It is definitely different from viewing a film with continuous movement and usually a story. I was not so interested to question film-viewing habits but this may happen and that's good. One day, Nikki arrived with a black umbrella. Her mother never left the apartment without taking an umbrella. Nikki struggled with it in the hallway. It became quite monstrous. The umbrella was big and the hall small. Sometimes it got stuck. The flow of the film stops and starts, like the film is getting stuck. It was like she was fighting with a kind of nothingness, a void. The opening and closing of the umbrella sounded like a bird flapping its wings in a cage. Gail Priest, our sound artist worked with the madness of this opening and closing sound.

YT: YOUR CONCERN FOR THE RHYTHM IS SIMILAR TO THOSE OF MANY CHOREOGRAPHERS.

HL: There probably is an aspect of choreography in creating a rhythm.

NH: Heidrun became a kind of choreographer because she had the choice of how the image would be framed. In this collaboration there are two people with different sensibilities and skills. Out of those sensibilities meeting, a third sensibility arose. I surrendered a certain amount of control as a choreographer but with a huge degree of trust. Heidrun has photographed every piece of work I have made. We have traveled together to Tibooburra (1996), to a remote landscape

of cliffs that looked out over vast plains that appeared like sea. In 1991, Heidrun photographed our Body Weather practice with Tess de Quincey at Lake Mungo. Both outback Australian places with a massive open sky and ground that Heidrun relates to so strongly.

YT: DID YOUR IMPROVISATION WHILE HEIDRUN TOOK PHOTOGRAPHS HAVE MUCH CONTINUITY WITH YOUR PREVIOUS WORK?

NH: Body Weather and improvisation are the two most influential practices that meet in my work. Improvisation came to the fore in front of the camera. Body Weather practices focus on the body's relation to space, receiving and exuding space and how objects might be used without reference to their usual purpose – though this is not strictly true in Recapturing the Vertical. In the sequence with an umbrella in a restricted space (Heidrun referred to) I felt I was animating the umbrella. Then the umbrella became the performer and I followed it. That relates to Body Weather practices where you respond to something outside yourself, rather than being the activator of the space. A lot of the little movement phrases were responding to the apartment, its walls and floor.

Some of the most powerful works I have made have been based on my family. These were works that I felt propelled to make. This is a very different proposition to being invited to work on someone else's idea.

The apartment had been empty for quite a long time. As a performer I brought my interest in how to re-inhabit a space to the collaboration. Curiously, one costume was something I had worn when I made a piece about my grandmother. Taking that into my mother's apartment felt right. This earlier piece was an attempt to re-inhabit my grandmother's body and her story, a kind of channeling through my perception of her as a granddaughter. Looking at photographs of her, I noticed the way she stood. Noticing her legs and finding ways my legs could become my grandmother's legs drew me in.

HL: The borders of dance have been reconceived. Recapturing the Vertical is not dance in the traditional sense, but it is definitely movement-based. At the end of the film, there is a sequence we call a dance with a geranium that is definitely a dance.

YT: WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN MOVING IN A PLACE LIKE TIBOOBURRA AND LIVING IN SYDNEY'S EASTERN SUBURBS?

NH: Bodies sometimes feel alien and displaced in remote landscapes. There was a real awareness of what it took to survive every time we left a house or a tent in Tibooburra. Unlike in the city, people need to know where you are. Whereas the apartment is an interior where the body belongs. Sometimes in the animation the body is uncomfortable within its own domestic habitat. That was a score I improvised with – disorientation, dislocation, losing balance but re-finding balance, recovering breath and equilibrium and orientation. There is sense of making choices and then having these choices taken away.

Out at Tibooburra during the Body Weather perceptual practice 'surrender to and receiving the landscape', I was pregnant. All I wanted to do was just sink down into that land. There was such a strong pull into land. This dislocation and surrender to ground and inability to get up again also folds into when my mother fell. I was afraid at Tibooburra if I surrendered to ground that I would never get up. A particular sense of the body and space has grown out of this project for a next work I might make about the body and captivity.

In previous works I feel satisfied with, multiple readings become available that I haven't pushed or intended to happen. They have arisen because of my relationship with the material. There has been an ability to create enough distance between the material and myself so something humorous, poetic and even pathetic can be equally read.

YT: HOW DOES RECAPTURING THE VERTICAL AS AN ANIMATION MAKE MULTIPLE READINGS POSSIBLE?

NH: The simple act of framing, literally by the camera, from someone else's perspective. Heidrun chose what the audience would see – choices that were not possible for me to make.

The animation has not made it cartoonesque... some moments you could imagine you were watching a film then time is interrupted by the shutter speed, the editing process or by the shift of light in the space. It moves from a dark space to a light space back to nighttime. There was the happy accident – the last sequence of photographs were shot at nighttime with clouds visible in the sky moving so the clouds become dancers in the piece. It opens us to the night sky, to a sense of location. This is another part of the transformative feeling I have that we go from that sense of enclosure to a sense of possibility or an exterior.

YT: DID YOU MAKE A STORYBOARD?

HL: The images were on my computer and I worked with them intensely. Later when I edited together with Peter Oldham I created a storyboard. Peter is incredibly inventive, creative and a technical wizard. He took to the images as soon as he saw them. The material is quite lonely. 'She' is all by herself in the apartment once she closes the door to the outside.

The first step was for Peter and I to collect all the sequences we wanted to use. Sequences had working titles i.e. the handbag sequence, the umbrella sequence, the geranium sequence. Once we put them together there was not a storyline but fragmented sequences or scenes, one after the other. Sometimes we cross-dissolved them or abruptly cut them together. I showed them to Nikki then we discussed them. We talked about the speed, about different rhythms and what would not be so interesting. Then I went back to Peter and made changes according to what we decided. Eventually, larger chunks of the animation evolved. It was important to find the order, how to get from one to the next – not just cut, cut, and cut. An arc emerged as the animation moved from the darkness of the corridor outside the apartment through the daylight inside and finishes with dusk.

Incorporating sound was the last element. I'm not experienced with sound and it is so influential for the overall atmosphere. I admire Gail Priest's work and she was very sympathetic with the figure in the animation so she chose to use human voice. I think it is very beautiful, manic and quite circular. Gail wanted to make a circular sound.

Heidrun's participation, Peter Oldham's editing and Gail Priest sound in *Recapturing the Vertical* were supported by Heidrun's fellowship from the Australia Council's Theatre Board.

HL: The main object of the fellowship was to put my archive of performance photographs online. It was fantastic to reflect back over my work. I always wanted to be somewhere else by the end. Alongside performance, I have always photographed my own subjects. This animation now brings something together. Working so long in the live performance context, whether theatre or dance, I've always been interested in the sequence. When I looked at the proof sheets in my archive, I noticed I'd photographed a lot of sequences – not only the single image that usually becomes the publicity image. In the sequences of stills, I was attracted to the tiny time lapses when a performer gets from one movement to another and the continuation of the developing movement. It is not like a video. I have been interested in sequences of photographs that register the time and space through which a body moves. Changing from analogue to digital, I realized I could create animations with this technology. You look at the playback screen and it's right there!

YT: THE SHIFT TO ANIMATION BECAME POSSIBLE BECAUSE OF THE DIGITAL TECHNOLOGY?

HL: Years ago at the Berlin Film Festival there was a fringe festival that went all night called 'The Long Night of Super 8'. You saw hundreds of Super 8 films. I saw one film of 4,000 Black and White still images. Now 25 years later...

NH: I haven't worked in this medium. I was in an unusual place where I handed over the work to be finished. Now this piece will continue to exist. The little film can go anywhere. We don't have to travel for our work to exist. Live work is so ephemeral. Carol Brown mentioned that she could continue to exist in another place that she is not; that the dancers won't get tired or injured but they can continue to dance.

Yana Taylor is a Sydney-based academic and performer.