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Creators: Braeuninger, R. and Seago, C.

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Knowledge of the Body Established through Personal Identity and Exposure to Dance Cultures as the Theme of Choreographic Communication

Renate Bräuninger

Liverpool Hope University

Catherine Seago

University of Winchester

This performative presentation integrated examples of dance practice and an oral dialogue between two presenters: one a dance practitioner (choreographer and performer), Cathy Seago; and the other a scholar, Renate Bräuninger

For our presentation at the World Dance Alliance Global Summit 2008, in Brisbane we decided to begin with a short dance example, which had been extracted from the multimedia work *Vanishing Point* (2008). Cathy performed a series of movement phrases, which were intricate in terms of rhythmic coordination and dynamic contrasts and used a complex and unpredictable grammar, apparent in the structure and fluidity of the movement materials.

Renate: In this paper we aim to break down choreography as a methodological process, proposing that there could be a clearer distinction between choreographic methods and compositional practices.

Cathy: This paper refers to choreography as the structuring method for organising activities and movements within a given time frame and through a specified space so that they create a desired effect in allowing a linear presentation of the theme, which has been determined by the body-centred compositional practice. Composition refers here to activities which work through the body, often featuring subjective, mechanical and conceptual approaches and which can be linked with the experience within the body as the dancer attempts to translate an idea into movement or to explore an idea through movement. This distinction allows us to discuss particular stages of the artistic process in creating a choreographic work.

Renate: This point of view might be applied to the work of Cunningham, where chance procedures are used to organise the dance materials once they have been established in the body. It is also apparent in the work of many early London Contemporary Dance School graduates who, influenced by the development of New Dance in Britain, work through improvisation with dancers to establish a movement language. While it should be widely accepted that choreographers build movements, and even entire dance training techniques in the body, in order to later serve their choreography, the distinction here is that the compositional units are created in the body without a central aim or objective, allowing the compositional work to determine, rather than illustrate the choreographic theme. The theorising here authenticates the compositional work as movement research, which is located closer to the dancer and the dancing body, than to the choreographic act.

Cathy: To elucidate this idea, we will be relating and using my own teaching and working experiences in different parts of South East Asia as a vehicle for identifying the place of the body and the conscious and unconscious mind in compositional practice; and using the cultural 'Other' to trace this. Through my practice and the analysis of it, we endeavour to establish a definition that might be useful to other practitioners or theorists, bringing an original perspective through breaking down the different stages of the creation process which tends to be referred to in its entirety and without definition.

Renate: This paper is set up drawing on a dialogue between Cathy's developing practice and theories of Françoise Lyotard (1924-1998) and Henri Bergson (1859-1941); here used as an interpretive framework on excerpts from the practice. This theoretical framework allows us to integrate the creative process into the interpretation of the composition, which a model that looks at choreography as text might not allow.

Cathy: In the performative presentation, two short dance excerpts demonstrated the notion of compositional units. In terms of my own working practice, composition can be defined as the generation of elements – dance phrases and other activities – which develop in isolation. This collection of composed materials is then structured in time and space toward choreography. The choreography comes to fruition, as the compositional units are organised together in the larger spatial context, and exist durationally. Initially, my working process is about generating movement without a central aim, and as far as possible without restriction. Certain restrictions in terms of culture and history will be evident; physical and intellectual knowledge and experience are implicit in any bodily use and derive from exposure to and development of practices, training and preferred movement approaches relating to the physique and style of the dancer. An additional restriction operating here is due to the dancer or choreographer's aesthetic sensibility, which draws on both the dance and daily culture to which the dancer has been exposed. The aim is to generate elements, which might be referred to as an original dance vocabulary, including spatial designs, dynamic phrasings and transitions and bodily organisation in action for discrete deconstruction. These elements can then be re-organised, seeking to establish a new kind of logic through the awkwardness of isolation. This subsequently becomes the

theme of the choreography. The compositional units ultimately form in my body; it is not clear whether this process is moving fluidly between the mind and the body¹ in terms of self-direction as well as experiential movement processes. Research (Calvo-Merino, Glaser, Grèzes, Passingham & Haggard, 2005) has shown that there are feedback loops operating between the brain and body and I can verify this from my own experience as a practitioner. However, in my process it seems to take place physically – at the site of the movement mechanics and bridge building between isolated elements in the compositional stage.



Catherine Seago in Evolving Motion's Vanishing Point
Photo: from video of performative presentation at WDAGS 2008

Renate: To expand on the idea of using the cultural 'Other' to trace a merger and juxtaposition of the cultural influences present in these units, we must first identify those influences in terms of various cultural experiences Cathy was undergoing, and likewise Cathy's students in encounters with her. To this end we apply Bergson's concept of *temps* (time as it proceeds along a line) and *durée* (a momentous experience of time that includes memories and anticipations):

Bergson's understanding of time [in this instance *durée*, is] 'a succession of instants [which] does not constitute time any more than it causes it to disappear,' because 'time is constituted only in the originary synthesis which operates in the repetition of instants,' and because 'this synthesis contracts

the successive independent instants into one another, thereby constituting the lived, or living present,' the present opens away from the investment in the now.

(Deleuze in Lepecki, 2006, p. 129)

In linear time your training in New York, your return to Britain and a series of residencies in Asia present distinct influences. Your work can be regarded as an expression of *durée* of those experiences.

Cathy: As a practitioner, my physical knowledge, composition and thus my choreographic signature have evolved through what could be divided into three areas of influence. Beginning with training in New York City, with Viola Farber-Slayton at Sarah Lawrence College (MFA 1998) and at the Merce Cunningham Dance Studio over a combined period of six years, I was heavily influenced by the rigour and the clarity afforded by spatial organisation to create a clear intention in the body and in the dancing. My composition focussed on further extending the spatial organisation for the body in choreography.

Renate: Subsequently you returned to Britain and found some problems of cultural translation?

Cathy: These influences failed to 'translate', due to trends in Britain, which I termed 'relativist'; a dilution of the American and the Laban traditions from which British Contemporary Dance developed. The trends in dancing and choreography seemed to lack rigour and complexity in treatment of space and time and depended more on the realities of the moving body. These appear more connected to, and expressive of the internal experience of moving and a paradoxically corporeal presence among abstracted movement themes. It can be seen in the use of timing established by the body's weight and organic sequencing which determines the place of the body in space.

Renate: Then you began this cycle of activity in Asian Pacific region?

Cathy: My experiences of spending one to three month periods working in Taiwan at TNUA, Kaosuing Arts High School and at the Gu-Ling Street Theatre, in Singapore with Odyssey Dance Theatre, and in China on a choreography project with a combination of South East Asian, Chinese and European artists enabled opportunities to develop my practice distanced from Western dance cultures and traditions. I had found resources in the West to be saturated due to the sheer quantity of people now working in the field of creative dance practice. There is pressure to produce outcomes and to contribute to a certain type of work in style, approach and bodily use which was not interesting to me. All effects are heightened by the necessity for assimilation and integration into a new dance community. I wanted to explore and re-realise my knowledge at a distance from this situation, simultaneously perceiving that I might be able to explore, develop and share my interest in dancing and compositional possibilities as choreographic content in Asia. It is distinct, but perhaps in the UK/US it is exhausted by its association with the historical development of Western contemporary dance. Those historical

developments of Western contemporary dance are characterised by locating the dancer and the dancing at the centre of the activities. The opportunities in different parts of Asia were incredibly exciting with a different approach to and use of the body in the culture and in dance. I perceived a greater rigour and discipline in the approach to refining bodily skills and a greater 'spirituality' at the centre of movement practice; this combination intrigued me.

Renate: Cathy's position is not that of an anthropologist or an ethnographer. Her interest going to South East Asia (and possibly New York also) is motivated more from practical artistic choices than from the interest of a researcher in foreign cultures. However, there is also an 'orientalist' fascination on Cathy's part with the cultural 'Other'; a preconception about what this cultural 'Other' could offer that might be useful for her own approach to choreography.

In the numerous discussions we had while teaching into the choreography degree at the University of Winchester, and later after I had moved to Liverpool to teach into a degree, which focussed more on culture in Dance Studies at Liverpool Hope University, we tried to discuss those influences. As a scholar, I tried to give feedback on what I saw in Cathy's composition and how it might be read or considered; offering her a theoretical framework through which to further explore possible developments. A cycle of theory and practice emerged where Cathy could focus additionally on the precise aims (for what is communicated) and work also with what is theoretically perceived in addition to her interest in dance making and what is intuitive, felt and then intellectually described as a 'logic' in compositional units. In this context I would like to refer to Susan Melrose (2005). Her comments on the decision-making processes of the expert performer/performance maker and the processes of intuition and decision making seem to relate very much to the experience Cathy was undergoing in terms of the juxtaposition of the materials known to the practitioner – even though Melrose is in this context not referring to cultural fusion.

My *sense* has long been that the expert performance-maker, in the most interesting of signature cases, *activates, interweaves, juggles, shuffles and modulates a range of largely intuited notions*, significantly including the affective and teleoaffective, submitting them progressively and necessarily to sets of material *dispositifs* inhering to disciplinary fields of practice. I *sense* that expert signature practitioners, in the performance-making, *intuit, incorporate (bringing difference into the equation), and intensify*, while stabilising and submitting the actional materials involved to the logics of professional production.

(Melrose, 2005)

Cathy's choreographic practice is rather different from that of other artists, creating a form of fusion. In this context fusion refers to a merger between a western dance form and a dance form, which originates in another culture. Both forms reflect developments in contemporary dance. Her movement vocabulary does not fuse forms but is influenced 1) by being exposed to the cultures and forms through living there and attending performances; and 2) by

teaching. Firstly, what were your experiences while teaching Western contemporary dance and working through composition in South East Asia?

Cathy: The experiences raised questions for me about the relationship between culture, dance technique and body use. And I discovered a link between dance as an exaggeration of every day culture and as an expression of cultural systems, which influenced the relationship I had with the dancers in the studio. Cultural systems consist of certain conventions within social interactions. In the studio these can be exemplified through the hierarchies, which implicate role, age and gender and the type and style of verbal exchange and spatial interaction between individuals. This link necessitated a rethinking of my practice-based teaching materials and the delivery of them.

Renate: What did you notice specifically?

Cathy: As a teacher, when I try to transmit knowledge I have to understand the students' physical conditioning in order to facilitate their learning and embodiment of 'new' movement. For the cycle of feedback to work, I must attempt to put myself in their position. In exploring this I made a number of adjustments, which became increasingly familiar on each visit to the region. This happened as a result of negotiating the Asian students' and artists' physical knowledge. In particular I found the following:

- 1) The students were much more effective in imitation and repetition as a way to 'know'. I noticed by working with students who could imitate steps faithfully that there is also a greater need for embodiment of particular movements, to guarantee that the dance phrases are more than rearrangements of steps to be applied through a range of approaches and executions. This in turn led me to think about my compositional practice, which might be more sophisticated in its attention to embodiment of other elements during the process of bridge building in determining compositional units.
- 2) Secondly, I observed a greater tendency for the students to work within the group than as individuals in picking up and executing material. Also evident was that less value is ascribed to the verbal; correction, refinement through thinking and marking steps, responding to correction and questioning, all of which involve the very individual activity of translating movement information and experience through reflective thought into analysis in order to direct the body from the mind.
- 3) Thirdly, the students were clearly less comfortable using extremes in dynamics; for example losing control or balance as the body submits to gravitational effects and momentum, again, a very individual act and experience. Examples of this might be found in the tensions, in the use of weight in throwing, falling or whipping movements or in exploring extremes of motion and momentum.

These observations brought me to a conclusion about the individual and about the distinct space between 'intellectualising' movements as a way to seek greater embodiment of the specifics, driven from a separate and distinct 'thinking self' which seems to direct the body and, of the physical sensation as developed and familiarised through repetition and replication of action. In the

latter, the body becomes familiar much more quickly but the result seems to feature less the individuality and *interpretation on the material* by the dancer. This affected my composition in two ways:

- 1) In my own compositional and choreographic process, I discovered a real tension in the distinction between the logical and rationale decisions and the intuitive decisions where there is an empirical fit, or as Melrose (2002) calls it, 'an affinity', [...] channels in performance through which insight might be experienced'.
- 2) Secondly, this brought my attention to the role of the other dancers in my work and the possibility for allowing greater space for the dancer as an individual; driving the work not only from my own experience and innate embodiment of compositional units.

Renate: Can you come to some conclusion about the cultural 'Other' and your use of it?

Cathy: I noticed a new (physical) knowledge and intuition emerging from the sum of the parts of these experiences that I was not easily able to isolate. It came from teaching practice; watching and listening to the bodies, and from the realisation of my dependence on verbal exchange which, due to the nuances of language, is less effective for both parties in a cross cultural exchange where the first language is not shared.

Renate: So has your creative practice changed, has your movement material or the way you explore and derive movement material changed as a result of the process of translating movement ideas within different cultures?

Cathy: Yes, there is a trace, although it is mostly transformed within my compositional practice in the following ways:

- 1) Greater attention to the size and articulation of the movements, relating to the 'size' and stature of the body/ body parts being presented.
- 2) The horizontal is used more frequently in place of the vertical for more rigorous exploration and application of dynamic alignment and also for what appears to create a greater sense of embodiment of expressive qualities of movement due to this compromise in the traditional hierarchy of body parts in space.
- 3) There is a more fluid use of dynamic and a sense of flow in place of a previous kind of 'rawness', from the fragmentation and awkwardness within the compositional units.
- 4) In the process, a greater interest in the individuality of dancer as a person expressing themselves.
- 5) An increased patience with the tension between the roles of logical and intuitive decision-making.

Renate: As already briefly mentioned, Bergson's concept of time seems to be helpful to describe the merger and juxtaposition of influences. Bergson's notions allow for refiguring what constitutes remembering. In simple terms, for Bergson 'the past is that which acts no longer' (Bergson in Lepecki, 2006, p.

129). In order for this statement to make sense, it demands detaching the 'act' from the understanding that frames it as the immediate visibility of an action at the moment of performance. For Bergson, any act, as long as it continues generating effect and an affect, remains in the present. As long as there is act, there is becoming; for Bergson, all that is present is becoming; only the past *is* (Lepecki, 2006, p. 129). Hence in the moment of creating the movement material and in its subsequent performance in a form of choreography, Cathy's different experiences as performer, choreographer and teacher collapse into movement sequences that are in the present while they are presented and might resist analytical dissection.

At this point in the performative presentation, a second dance excerpt was designed to illustrate for the delegates these transformed elements in practice.



Catherine Seago performing excerpts from Evolving Motion's *Vanishing Point* (2008)
Photo: from video of performative presentation at WDAGS 2008

Renate: Represented in these compositional units are elements mentioned previously, some clearly so. The application of Lyotard's idea of the figural, which he introduces in his *Discours, figure* (1971) allows us to interpret abstractness, the lines, the changes and shifts between different shapes, which constitute the *figural* or *Gestalt*. A reading of the *figural* can happen through associations with likeness to shapes and forms of movements of the body that have a suggestive quality of all kinds of situations of life.

In the application of a model derived from linguistics, the sign, which is the union of the signifier and the signified, can then be read as index, icon or symbol. In contrast in an interpretation of the figural, a visual line or shape is looked at as image-matrix-figure. In other words, the derivation of meaning is not borrowed from a model based on conventions as we know them from linguistics; for example, in relation to the English language there is an agreement that a piece of furniture with a particular shape is called chair. Therefore, looking at dance as text, certain movements are named in a particular way and have a certain meaning. Instead, in the model we are proposing, the associations that lines and shapes can have for us can be seen as providing meaning as well. The reading happens through a likeness, a familiarity and recognition between the lines and shapes, which could also be a diagrammatic likeness. Therefore, an interpretation derives not from a direct connection of an element and its meaning, the one pointing to the other. Instead, Lyotard (1971) uses Georg Friedrich Wilhelm Hegel's dialectic philosophy and Sigmund Freud's (1900) *Interpretation of Dreams* where something might point to the opposite of it. Film scholar David Norman Rodowick (2001, p. 46) defines the *figural* in his partial translation of Lyotard, as follows:

What I call the figural is not synonymous with a figure or even the figurative. It is no more proper to the plastic than to the linguistic acts. It is not governed by the opposition of word to image; spatially and temporally, it is not bound to the logic of binary opposition. Ever permutable – a fractured, fracturing, or fractal space, ruled by time and difference – it knows nothing of the concept of identity.

Beyond Melrose and my own application of Lyotard's model there has not been wide acknowledgement of this approach in dance studies. His model allows us to take in the artistic process in so far that the artist is inspired by something which is then transformed into something else in the process of creation.

We can observe - in the lines and shapes of Cathy's movement material, in its *figural* - the remembering as it 'becomes' alongside less recent influences and merges with other cultural systems. Some components of those cultural systems have been exaggerated into dance and thereby transformed. A direct, linear and untransformed reference is often hard to find. However, for example in Cathy's compositional units, which only can be described verbally here, we can detect the following:

- 1) Firstly, the hand gestures reveal the influence of Asian dance forms, but those are not used with the same narrative intent, rather as an exploration of movement on a smaller kinaespheric scale.
- 2) Secondly, Cathy's use of various levels extends the use of space, exemplifying the floor as a surface for different points of weight bearing for the body. There is a sense of precarious grounded-ness that creates an 'unknown', animalistic (or primal) connection; an innate physicality over the extrinsic expression which can be traced to Cunningham's work, for example.
- 3) Thirdly, there is a negotiation of the dynamic flow in movement, which creates a particular impression to the audience but never leaves the realm of

'abstractness'. This is reflected in the way the body changes from shape to shape. Such changes can be initiated through different body parts in which dynamics are contrasted.

So, in conclusion we return to the afore mentioned distinction between the different stages of the composition process and the choreography as the outcome of the latter with which we began; how is bodily memory played out in the development of compositional units which contribute to an evolving choreographic signature/voice in a larger spatial and durational context? How are distinct units used to create choreography? Cathy describes the 'moment of delight; of knowing something for the first time when you return to a particular sensation'; when within units of composition, the 'rememberings' are fluid enough to connect shapes from different parts of the process and allow them to come together. When compositional elements unite, the choreographic context reveals itself and becomes thematic. Influences from different times, spaces and contexts unite in one body; the artist is transformed by her new knowledge. It is perhaps this delight and fascination that can be said to fuel the cross cultural dialogue which then generates its own sphere in each artist.

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Notes

¹ The research of Beatriz Calvo-Merino, Daniel Glaser, Julie Grèzes, Dick Passingham and Patrick Haggard (2005) has shown that there is a close connection between motor activities in our bodies and the stimulation of brain areas and vice versa. For example, there is greater muscular stimulation, if we watch a dance form we have studied.

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Biographical statements

Dr. Renate Bräuninger, lecturer in dance, Liverpool Hope University, Great Britain, has a background in both music and dance, receiving an MA in Musicology, Performing Arts and German Literature from the Ludwig Maximilians University, Munich. With a scholarship from the German Academic Exchange Service (DAAD) she studied at the Performing Arts Department at New York University. In New York she also created her own choreography and participated in the choreographic workshops at Dance Theatre Workshop under Bessie Schönberg. Renate was an Associate Lecturer at different German Universities and Lecturer in Dance and Choreography at the University of Winchester, UK. As a Research Assistant at Middlesex University, London, she worked with Susan Melrose in practice as research. Her PhD is about discursive strategies applied to the analysis of the relationship between music and movement in dance and film.

Catherine Seago is a lecturer in Dance at the University of Winchester and Artistic Director of EvolvingMotion. Her research areas are interdisciplinary collaborative processes, and physical knowledge and codified techniques in choreographic language. She has studied at University Surrey Roehampton UK, at Sarah Lawrence College and MCDS, USA, as a Fulbright Scholar.