

Eclecticism of Form and Motioned Bodies

Pauline Manley

Eclecticism of form is the placement of widely variant forms within the same arena of practice and is an attempt to create an embodied subversion of fully habitual states of being. This paper emerges from my investigations into eclecticism and variance in relation to personal practice, academic and public pedagogy and the *Continuum* performance model.

This variance is formally, not culturally, based. I have sought out movement forms that are readily available to me in my world in an aim to broaden my own definition of what contemporary dance might be, positing the form as a motional continuum of possibilities and a dehiscent practice. I use dehiscence here as botanical term. Dehiscent plants actively, almost violently, rupture open their seed pods to fling their progeny away, seeking fresh environs, landscapes and horizons, falling far from the tree.

I will propose that eclecticism of form, with particular reference to the *Continuum* performances, creates a world where dance forms collide and coexist at a distance from the field that produced them. So Tai Chi is next to Burlesque and Contemporary is next to Funk. But the ground they all walk on is movement and the articulated movement principles emerge from this ground.

But this formal eclecticism is not about fusion, comparison or placing forms next to each other in neat and distinct fields of play. It is about the ‘whoa’ factor; the feeling of being slapped around the head by variation. It is about what happens when variant forms butt up against and jostle each other, when they bleed into and stain each other, when they send each other into sharp relief, when they juxtapose homologies, analogies, distinctions and separations.

And all of this attempts to subvert the “already fully actualized forms of response that limit adaptation to new circumstances”, (Casey, 1984: 286). These “customary routines”(Casey, 1984:286) are executions of pre-ordained tenets, where the boundaries are firm and set, limiting “free variation” or “spontaneous action” (Casey 1984:286).

The mimetic and repetitive cycles of much contemporary dance training, and I include here the watching of dance as an inherent part of this training, provide postural formations with the status of iconic emblem. I return, time and time again, to these places and it feels like home, familiar as making a cup of tea, integral to my dancing self and my position in the field. This eclectic practice demands spontaneity by developing an ever-expanding series of ‘I cans’ and ‘I might’s’ and seeks to prevent the ‘settling into’ that can occur when working in a particularised form.

Eclecticism of form seeks to make dance not a home, but a world – a world with many terrains. Unrelenting variation can be disconcerting, but what can emerge is a deeply abiding but brightly conscious understanding of malleable sets of movement principles.

Conscious eclecticism creates distillation. Principles which travel across forms reveal themselves as motional essentials, whilst formal idiosyncrasies reveal fresh horizons of possibility. Emergent congruencies and divergences can then be thematised, acting as a ballast to the disconcerting effect of the ‘whoa’ factor.

For example, energy genesis and control could be such a thematised intention. In Tai Chi a dancer moves in the oscillating flow, experiencing gentle holdings, breathing stillnesses and calm pressings into space, all emanating from the solidity of the earth and our fleshy adhesion to it, as the upright body rolls over these planted feet and oily ankles. From this to Jazz, where body bits are separated and held in their own energetic sphere and are punched into space in a series of sharp arrivals, held in staccato time frames and captured in momentary photographic stillness. And yet there are the surprising similarities; the flexed hand, the bent knee, the extension of limbs into space. These thematised

generalities of the body can become a basis for instruction and practice, constantly re-informing praxis without sacrificing the repetition of physical training.

The ‘whoa’ factor is at work, in moving from Tai Chi to Jazz, and keeps attention alive through the re-alienation of movement, as the ‘not being comfortable’ foregrounds the activity. If the actions have not settled under my skin, if I have not imbibed them into my dark and invisible innards, then they remain conspicuous and manifest. They stand away from me as a slightly strange phenomena and I need to attend to them fully and sharply. And it is by juxtaposition, by placement, that an array of forms can be kept strange. So, while a dancer, a witness, a body becomes accustomed, they do not become “fully actualized”, (Casey, 1984:286). There is refreshment through re-alienation and familiarity is tainted by juxtaposition.

Constant re-orientation can create the edgy feeling of not quite not knowing where you are, and must lead to the question, well, where exactly is this? What is peculiar to this place? What has left inflections? What kind of time am I of here? How do I find my way to easeful knowledge? How do we stand on our feet in this form of dancing? Where is the pelvis placed? What is its journey? Is this my centre? What is the relationship between cultural function, expectation, experience and physical form? Do I like this form? Why? Why not? What do my proclivities reveal about my history and my creative future?

Dance can then be re-languaged, creating descriptively malleable lexicons that reticulate back into the practice through hybridizations and the traversing of strange terrains. This can create a specificity of meaning impossible with the hollowness of stale language.

But perhaps the main objective of this eclectic practice is to open up a world.

Eclecticism of Form and Continuum

Since 2000 there have been five *Continuum* dance performances, held at the Tap Gallery in Sydney. Each dance artist or group is given ten minutes to do with what they will. The curatorial approach is based on the ‘whoa’ factor and the removal of sociological fences and hierarchies. Styles of dance that have been represented include Contemporary, Modern, Jazz, Funk, Physical Theatre, Tai Chi, Improvisation, Samba, Capoeira, Rock and Roll, A Capella Singing, Poetry, Table Dancing, Burlesque, Qi Gong, Butoh, Slapstick, Ciroc, Tap, Ballet, Hip Hop, Break Dancing, Swing, Rockabilly and I feel like I haven’t even scratched the surface yet. However, the predominant form remains contemporary dance, so out of eight acts in each performance, at least three have been drawn from this field, including such artists as Julie-Ann Long, Kay Armstrong, De Quincey Company, Darren Green, Rebecca Devine, Diane Wilder, Selena Gannon, Tony Osborne, Kate Holmes, Margaret McGillcon, De La Bombe, Lillie Ivanovski, Sally Bargwana, Lee Miller, Julie Payne and Rachel Edds.

Directly after *Continuum 4*, an audience member said to me something like ‘I never got that kind of dancing, but I got it tonight.’ He was speaking of the Contemporary performances he had seen. I wanted to kiss him. This was an opening up that created a clearing and it was through the demystification of eclecticism. *Continuums 1-5* have been an attempt to create a dehiscent performance practice that reaches out, away from itself and in so doing creates an opened palette of understandings.

By placing the butoh-esque dance of the De Quincey Co next to the burlesque of Elizabeth Burton which is next to the improvisation of Tony Osborne, meaning bleeds. These apparently contrary forms suffuse each other, re-arranging pre-conceived systems of significance and altering atmospheres. This subversion can bring bodies closer to our vision, seen at close range as spatio-temporal beings in motion, rather than as mere exemplifications of a formal aesthetic. In the end these forms become just different ways of moving and what ripples through this world of movement is an ‘ahh’ of understanding.

A form such as burlesque, which is designed to tantalise, titillate, tease, enliven, entertain and please, has clear and familiar intentionalities. It does not demand an unraveling of great complexities.

Placed next to a form that is less easily read, the clearer meanings of burlesque can diminish the obfuscation. Accessible physicalisations direct attention to the body instead of to a realm of elusive and sophisticated meanings surrounding, propelling, enshrouding or engulfing sheer physicality. When watching burlesque, the audience need not furrow their brows in an effort to understand or to be seen to understand. You can just have a laugh and undo a garter belt.

But the arena of contemporary dance is heavy with the intellectual expectation of meanings bigger than movements and encircling reflexivities decodable only by the aficionado.

The DeQuincey Company engulfs the *Continuum* audience, creating a world rich with pre-linguistic significances and oozing visceral inter-subjectivities. The audience are at once drawn into this strange place and kept at bay by distinction from the performer whose liminality is manifest.

When the Burlesque legend Elizabeth Burton enters the space she smiles directly at the audience, engaging them anteriorally, inviting them into a world she co-creates with them and her quotidian human-ness is presented in her vulnerable and exposed flesh.

The lightness of Burlesque and the redolence of artistic dance bleed backwards and forwards, altering and refreshing atmospheres. So Elizabeth Burton's burlesque gains an artistic solidity, being presented not as an oddity or a relic, but merely as another dance form and the DeQuincey Company's performance is less distant, strange and elusive to the inexperienced. *Continuum* has avoided the all too familiar situation in Contemporary dance where dancers dance for other dancers.

Continuum is a journey that becomes an accumulation of variant dance experiences and atmospheres, establishing clearings through a series of apparent dichotomies. The fundamental dichotomy is that it is through the discombobulation of the ‘whoa’ factor that clearings and understandings are made possible.

A secondary dichotomy is the relation between the bleeding of meaning and the essential relinquishment of moving on to new landscapes. There is demand to let go of an experience and move on. This partial forgetting allows an ‘innocent eye’ created by the re-alienation of movement modes. So Jazz seems strange again because it is placed next to a Tai Chi performance.

Curatorial rhythm and arrangement do not allow participants, both dancer and witness, time or space to sink into the appropriate arena of expectation. The complacency of the aficionado is replaced with an expectant innocence, as dancer and witness are inserted in a broad plenum of movement modalities.

This opened expectation is the entrance to a cleared understanding, subtended by artist generated contextualization. Unspoken expectation is replaced by embedded explication as the master of ceremonies, Stuart Grant, reads out what the artists wish to say about their own work. The absence of a written program gives this information embodied and temporal immediacy and supports performance with illumination.

Another apparent dichotomy is that while the curatorial inclusion and placement has exposed generalized homologies, those of bodies in motion, so has it made each form stand apart. The ‘life’ of each piece is afforded an increased sharpness and colour by the symbiotic existence of homology and separation. So what happens in these *Continuum* dance performances is a heterogeneous meta-kinesis grounded in a homology of motion but springboarding into attention to idiosyncrasy and specificity.

I began to curate *Continuum* to escape the involution of dancers dancing for other dancers, so I sought out those who were vitally interested in dance, but were baffled and excluded by the rarified axioms of an elusive form. Then I began to ask questions.

What are the relations between Rock and Roll, Tai Chi and Contemporary dance? What would happen if contemporary dance was served in small parcels? What happens when the sacred and the profane meet? Could the rhetorical freedoms of Contemporary dance be realized through the turbulence of eclecticism? Is Contemporary dance a defined form? Could it be dance that happens in the 'now'? What would happen if the hierarchies of cultural significance were melted and we were left with motioned bodies and a world of motion?

Bibliography

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