

Scenes from another life (the paper)

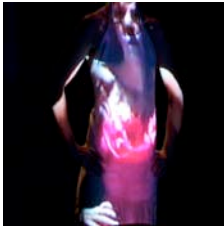
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“Our bodies are inescapable...we live in them.”

*(something I read somewhere once)*¹



What is a dancer? She is and is not her body. She cannot be reduced to her body, but she is not separable from it...If the body is the instrument on which the dance is played, then the woman who dances, being both player and played, is a mysterious whole greater than the sum of her parts.

(Sandler 1997: 197)

What is my dance now? My body is saturated with images and details. My choreography has become an exorcism of ghosts of “opening-nights past” as I dance out memories and events inscribed on my body. A chorus of my other selves now accompanies my stage performance, live and virtual, real and imagined, past and present.²

As a dancer I ‘understand’ and reflect on the world through the instrument of my body. The body is the content and the vehicle of expression for an art form inextricably linked to the ‘present’. Dance, shifting through and between bodies, is intangible, elusive, transient, and eventually lost, confronting each dancer from an early age with her own mortality. The art form of dance is in danger of remaining frozen in time and place at the beginning of its development, in the infancy of its vocabulary, reinventing the (cart)wheel. It denies change in the physical body as it updates the face of its population. It ignores continuity as its heritage disappears with its experienced artists. Its legacy is confined to a few words in a review, a poorly filmed video document, a poster.

¹ Program note for “Scenes from another life” performance in Bodyworks Festival, Dancehouse, North Carlton, March 2003.

² My stage performance incorporates live dance, song, comic monologue, recorded text/music, and video projection of myself (tiny or life-sized) onto my live body, and larger than life in a spoof of a Hollywood dance sequence onto the theatre walls, into which I enter and exit.

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Her own body is seeking, longing to find, the vanished body whose motions produced it.
(Foster 1995: 183)

Performance is a site for both the establishment and relinquishing of identity. In front of an audience I exist, I present a particular life or self. These lives, selves, are simultaneously changing and constant, written on my body as lived experience. I want to be seen to exist beyond a particular performance moment, and into that moment, I want to bring the ‘meaning’ inherent in my body. *I want dance to be about real things*,³ the range of emotions, images, and events that form and inform my moving body.

All performance work begins and ends in the body. (Schechner 1973: 132)

My body is the constant, it is, as Merleau-Ponty asserts, central as the “locus for experience as it is lived in a deepening awareness”.⁴ (Zarrilli 1995: 14) My work is “tied to an interest in (my) own self as a form of remembered, public performance”.⁵ (Marshall 2003: 39)

My body is the fabric onto which all objects are woven, and it is, at least in relation to the perceived world, the general instrument of my comprehension. (Merleau-Ponty 1962: 235)

Dance making becomes a post-modern puzzle in which one must sort the sample from the original, the memory from the dream. It becomes a dissection of the body in search of clues: the formative events that shaped the present, for what’s changed and why other things haven’t. **Scenes from another life** (the performance) attempts to synthesize my hybrid body, to resolve my self-image and my imagined self. My choreography has become a montage of my other lives public and private, past & present, actual & virtual, real & imagined, stage & screen, as live body and televisual body.

³ My comment to colleague and Director Luke Hockley during rehearsals for creative development of “Scenes from another life.”

⁴ Zarrilli quoting Levine, Donald Nathan (1985) *The Flight from ambiguity*. Chicago: University of Chicago press, p.62.

⁵ Jonathan Marshall reviewing my performance, “Scenes from another life,” as part of the Bodyworks Festival program at Dancehouse, March 2003. Review published in Real Time arts journal, June/July 2003. Conference Proceedings: Dance Rebooted: Initializing the Grid
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As the show's title indicates, the body and our sensory memory constitute another life, including dreams, awkwardness, yet also our pleasures and our most comforting personal sensations. (Marshall 2003: 39)

So I begin with a dance of **small moments**, of a body *suffused with the quirks of recollection*. (Marshall 2003: 39) I create a text from many texts to guide the structure, a collage of bodily experience.

[A dance]⁶

Dreaming or remembering

falling asleep in a public place

pinpointing something in the distance, *a window across the lawn*

things fall into and pass through the body, get caught in the ends

(the muscle wastes, the vertebrae degenerate)

involuntary actions—the sneeze

holding someone else's baby, fear of dropping it

(I fall & the plait is caught on the meat hook)

tightly woven around your hair that rose in strangled curls

moving in a yellow bedroom light

the air is wet with sound

the faraway yelping of a wounded dog

drawing in the dirt at the bus stop

a slow faucet leak

(the last image from Blood simple)

Your house is so soft and fading (he holds me)

a light goes on

and a door opens

and a yellow cat runs out on the stream of hall light

scents (greasepaint, powder...Magnolia)

⁶ A live dance accompanies the paper presentation at this point in conjunction with the poetic text. Conference Proceedings: Dance Rebooted: Initializing the Grid
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arching into Helen's slow fall
to lay on your back, to laugh uncontrollably
16, flower in my hair, tiered pink dress
a string of yellow carnival lights comes on
David Roche's circling pattern
the wooden bird on the desk that dips its beak in the glass of water
and I hear a banjo tango
a park, a tree, shade, shadows, hiding
*I watch as you disappear*⁷

I order the fragments into a new montage. I create a physical score out of the footage of my past—swimming certificates, physical ordeals, recurring images.

From a suitable distance
she opened her eyes
the light fell in first, sharp, blue
perform a safe jump
then the shape of it emerged, the edges formed
tread water
it spoke in whirrs and rumbles past her
tunnelling a furrow along one cheekbone
a stroke already used may be repeated
hip carry
the asymmetry of it made her shift in her seat
and refold her hands, right thumb on top
a clasp around the neck from behind
small moments snapped off her spine
and began to build a pile beneath her chair
*undress slowly in deep water*⁸

⁷ Lines in italics are excerpts from song lyrics "Watch her disappear" by Tom Waits and Kathleen Brennan (2002) Alice. Los Angeles: Shock Records.

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no-one seemed to notice

It is almost as if the skin itself served as a notebook, a reminder of what was not allowed to be forgotten. (Grosz 1994: 132)

My life between company dancer and solo performer exists in screen space. I began creating dance video work to assert my existence, imbuing my presence with a palpable history, and with it credibility, a meaning. On screen, dance can reappear and be replayed. It becomes a tangible artefact accessible across geographical and temporal locations.

As the movement of the dancer and dance are inscribed in film and video, that inscription becomes the artefact that endures over time. And by this process, as choreographers, dancers and filmmakers, future generations will have access to the marks we made. (Bromberg 2000: 27)

In choreographing for video I am exploring mechanisms by which I can translate the kinaesthetic intimacy of dance and the body to the screen—to make my sweat bead on the surface of the screen. I am drawing attention to the ‘individual’ experience, the emotional and psychological landscape which ‘lives’ in the physical landscape. (Reid 2001: 1)

The “rush of technological advances”⁹ pushes the body into a state of catatonia—we become a static mass hunched around a flurry of eye-hand movement. The shape of the audience has changed and barely recognizes the dancer’s body. Technology is re-inscribing the body and dance must re-consider its syllabus.

I have created a video dance body that acknowledges and responds to both changes in my body and changes in the way we view. My dance vocabulary has refined: instead of a

⁸ Extracts from conditions for the awards of Survival & Proficiency Certificates from Royal Life-Saving society *Manual of Water Safety and Life-Saving*, Fifth Edition. (1974) Melbourne: Wilke and Company Ltd, p. 7 & 8.

⁹ John Storey in *Change and continuity: what comes next?* RMIT Image, Text and Sound Creative Media Conference, 2003.

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leap, I gasp; a lift of a finger replaces an arabesque; to fall I close my eyes. Virtuosity for me now is about detail, specificity, a quality, and about a psychokinetic connection. I have different things to say with and about my body. My 36,000th leg brush tells me less than my first wrinkle.

I dance the new body of the camera and become both dancer and viewer. I come closer to the nuance of the body and its underlying emotive or psychological inscription. Choreography becomes cinematic as I re-frame the body and re-sequence the movement. With the camera I control the body's identity, how it is seen. In the edit suite I control the meaning, imposing connections. A new dance exists outside the physical body. My body is returned to me as a site rather than an object.

It can serve, not only as an instrument for conveying the artist's vision, but it can itself contribute a view of the world created by the intelligence inherent in its own mechanism. When this is achieved it creates a reality, an experience which, as a whole, can only exist on film. (Deren 1945: 346)

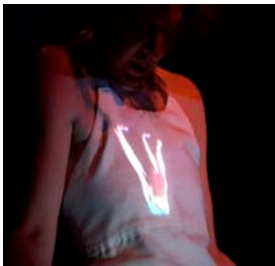
My 'video dance body' "transcends the limitations of the material body" and

offers the possibility of alternative modes of dance. The intervention of technology has...opened up new choreographic possibilities as the spatio-temporal boundaries of the body can be made to appear increasingly fluid, and dynamics can be manipulated independently of the physical body. (Dodds 2001: 170)

But alas, I have been split into a Cartesian dilemma. My video dance body exists and my 'present' self remains intangible. When I re-enter the theatre I carry in the cinema. I have become shaped by my own transposition of dance to the screen...a focus on the minutiae of gesture and expression, the echoes and layers of meaning and history behind a glance, a finger point...small and random actions have become large, vast, loud, significant. In line with Dodds' assertion that

dancing bodies may become inscribed with alternative patterns of movement as a result of the detailed, gestural vocabularies and pedestrian movement that are often employed in video dance (Dodds 2001: 163)

I have become inscribed by self-imposed images of myself. How can I resolve this multiplicity? Will I, and the live dance form, disappear, fading through over-duplication, and will my clone, my image of myself become more real than me?



Since the body is also a symbol, a metaphor, a physicalization of things, it is often a battle field on which conflicts are played out...

(Sandler 1997: 201)

My Grade 2 report card said I displayed a keen interest in puppetry. Some things don't change. I am now both puppet and puppeteer as the tiny image of myself, "mini me" (even the name is imposed by my cinema viewing life) enters and becomes trapped in the landscape of my body—the image of a dancer as an image of a body in a specific period in time, always from the past, a younger self irretrievable and immutable, elusive like the physical art form of dance. This mini me has become a superior body, preserved by technology. While the physical body deteriorates the virtual body defies gravity, "climbs every mountain," comes from all angles, persists.

The body as a plastic and unstable phenomenon which is open to perceptual reconstruction (Dodds 169)

I have arachnophobia, an irrational fear of the microchip, the cyborg, death—an irrational fear of being eliminated, of hidden dangers, a deadly detail, the machine takes over, and I

become Stelarc¹⁰ and must invite the penetration of my body by the small sharp teeth of meat hooks...the sheep carcass of my youth, my Rapunzel plait caught, the fear of physical pain reduced to an emotional reaction/memory.

As technology reduces the size of our movements, it amplifies the microscopic.

I'm making a big thing out of it. I must get some perspective, remember that it isn't real, it's two-dimensional, and my physical body still holds the controls. I can re-write the program, change the rules, toss the machine against the wall, put things in perspective, return to the physical body, assert my subjectivity.

“Reid explained that she wasn't even sure if these and other remembered gestures and songs were her experiences or moments from films she'd seen, or stories she'd told.”...or reviews that had been written about her. (Marshall 2003: 39)

[A film]¹¹

Our fascination with films is now thought to be not a fascination with particular characters and intrigues so much as a fascination with the image itself, based on a primal 'mirror stage' in our psychic growth. Just as we were, when infants, confronted with the gloriously complete view of ourselves in the mirror, so now we identify with the gloriously complete presentation of a spectacle on the screen. (Andrew 1984: 149)

I am televisualized. The camera and the edit are inextricably bound up with my actual being, with my real body. My memory of standing on the edge of a high-diving board is

¹⁰ Stelarc is an Australian artist who performed a series of “suspension events” in the 1970's and 80's. He considers the body to be obsolete in the face of technology and his artworks attempt to re-design the body.

¹¹ I run toward the back wall, into blackness, as my film self runs in a red-sequined dress (a copy of Cyd Charisse's dress from “The Band Wagon”) through parks, over bridges, up stairs...alluding to scenes from famous Hollywood musicals (“Sweet Charity”, “Singing in the Rain”, “The Sound Of Music”). The dance sequence becomes exaggerated, the dress turns gold, the locations shift, until the Ginger Rogers dress is stripped away and a likeness of the red-headed protagonist from Run Lola Run emerges, the effort now visible, the illusion peeling away...my film self runs toward the camera, and the live me runs forward toward the audience out of the blackness.

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interspersed with shots of the coyote's face before the cliff gives way in the roadrunner's wake, of Esther Williams' dive, of the moment before walking on the comedy club stage. Just as video dance can redefine the vocabulary of dance, can physically enhance, defy gravity, extend time, refigure space, my physical body is a hybrid site, redefined and reconfigured, its vocabulary both real and imagined.

By taking my dance into screen space I was trying to make reality out of fiction, to imbue light with substance, image with sensation. By bringing the screen body back into my live body I am reasserting the physical, augmenting and redefining the dance of real time with reel time. I create a video dance body that, in turn, recreates my live body. I cannot distinguish between my real self and my imagined self. I create the illusion of truth as I reveal my lies, my fantasies. I want the audience to see my imaginings, my dreams and illusions, me.

The body image is always slightly out of step with the current state of the subject's body...there seems to be a time lag in the perception and registration of real changes in the body image. (Grosz 1994: 84)

Video dance has both liberated the dancing body from the small window of youth, the pedestal of virtuosity, and imprisoned it under the stark reality of the magnifying glass. The mature dancer can live on through specificity and nuance and be simultaneously crucified by the scrutiny of the close-up. The body is still an object of desire: the televised body may only have to lift a finger rather than its own weight, but it must look desirable doing it. A wrinkle may reflect a history, suggest a life, trace a pattern of emotions, but it is a reminder of our own mortality.

...in the fast flowing river of change we must not struggle to go back or even strive to remain still; we must steer our future.¹²

¹² Fazal Rizvi as quoted by John Storey in *Change and continuity: what comes next?* RMIT Image, Text and Sound Creative Media Conference, 2003.

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My body, my dance now comments on the changes in all our bodies—bodies seated and sedentary before a screen, closed by terrorist threat, cosmetically altered, starved, severed, displaced, resisting change yet recanting history.

[A dance]¹³

My head is hot
My brain is bubbling
I sweat and I shiver
My lungs are scorched
My heart bounces like an egg boiling

The more I dance anxiety, the more I end up standing still.
My mobile phone defaults to September 11.
I am four years younger than Madonna.
I want to be able to open my body without bracing for impact.
*Alas, then she is drown'd?*¹⁴

My body, my dance now proposes another physical response, finishes “making a scene.”

to fall asleep in a public place with your head back
and your mouth open
to lay on your back with your stomach exposed like a cat
to laugh uncontrollably
to call out inside someone else's house
to take your shoes off and turn the soles of your feet upwards
to hold out your hand
to expose your throat
to close your eyes
to receive touch
to move through space.¹⁵

¹³ A live dance accompanies the paper presentation at this point in conjunction with the poetic text.

¹⁴ Ophelia's drowning from Shakespeare's Hamlet, Act IV, Scene 7.

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So to an extent my live performance has become art imitating virtual life. My physical body is the interface. The boundaries are blurred *between biological and technological, natural and artificial*. Concepts of identity and subjectivity are questioned. (Dodds 2001: 164) This paper creates another life out of my performance, my body. The body becomes text, but the text is “danced” into a choreographic pastiche of metaphor, citation and creative writing. Here I try to use academic enquiry as an improvisational score—it provides a structure to save me from drowning in artistic metaphor without squashing invention. This paper gives my dance another life.

I want to make a dance about stillness, without moving slowly. (Hay 1994: 46)



¹⁵ Text by Dianne Reid and featured in soundtrack of “Scenes from another life” by Mark Lang. Conference Proceedings: Dance Rebooted: Initializing the Grid Published by Ausdance National, December, 2005 ISBN 1 875255 16 8

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