

Cecil Street Studio: improvised community and sustainable practices

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It is a little after 7.00pm on a Sunday evening and people are still arriving, slightly hurried as they kick off their shoes before entering the studio. They pay \$7.00 and find a seat facing the bare studio floor; white floor against the pink walls. The room seems crowded, although the numbers are not large, and people talk comfortably sitting on the few benches and chairs or on the floor. One of the performers emerges from her conversation amongst the audience to front the group and the babble drops away. "How many of you are new to *Conundrum*?" she asks. A few people raise their hands, but many do not. The question is a litmus test for the state of the audience and as a way to bring the novice into the game. "Everything performed here tonight will be completely improvised" she continues. "And tonight on *Conundrum* we have..." and she rattles off a list of the names of the groups or solo performers who will be performing that evening. Some of the names or groups are different from the last *Conundrum* one month previously. But two of the groups, State of Flux and 5 Square Metres, have been performing at *Conundrum*, on the last Sunday of every month, for the last eight years.

The host returns to her seat amongst the audience and the first performer slowly, tentatively pushes into the space opening it up with his presence and gradually defining the emptiness as an extension of his imagination. This is what the audience has come to see; the grappling with the infinity of possibilities as mediated by the skills, temperament, mood and physicality of this performer. For the audience, part of the appeal of the performance lies in their knowledge that this dancing has never been known in quite this way before. The very public scrutiny of the way he shapes his actions into an event makes the audience complicit in a kind of undressing. It is one in which the choreographic process has been rendered almost completely naked covered only by the tiny garment of intellectual speed and physical skill that this dancer possesses. Everyone knows the possibilities for failure here and this heightens the

tensile connection between audience and performer. It is a connection that is electrified if the dancer reveals some mercurial magic, that even he didn't know was possible.

Conundrum is about improvisation as a performance practice. Since its inception in 1996 people have gathered on the last Sunday of every month (January and December excluded) to participate in or watch improvisation in various mediums, but usually centering on the body as the vehicle. It is a hybrid event with dancers, actors and musicians participating in a format that is informal, maintains modest production values and is rooted in the performers desire to practice improvisation in performance. Conundrum is the defining event, a lighthouse to pinpoint and illuminate a range of improvisation and body practices which constellate around the small dance space Cecil Street Studio in Fitzroy, Melbourne. Founded and run since 1996 by Martin Hughes and Fiona Cook, Cecil Street Studio has effectively become a home for improvisation in Melbourne with a philosophy that attempts to be inclusive of a range of dance-centered practices, physical theatre and bodywork. In my view, the people who participate in the activities there collect in a loose way to operate as a community as a way of sustaining and developing their enthusiasm for improvisation. They do so partly out of economic necessity – it's cheaper to hire a studio when you share the costs. But there is also a shared understanding and at times a common language about how improvisation in performance functions and how it is developed. This in turn, provides an outlet for their investigative drive, acknowledgement of their artistic output and definition for them as members of a like-minded community.

My interest with this paper is to credit some of the people who have underpinned the establishment of this community, to document some of its activities and to discuss the values and artistic concerns that meld the disparate individuals and practices into a flexible but functioning community.¹ This is a grass-roots community, loosely

¹ I interviewed the following people in relation to this paper from May 30 – June 16 2004: Martin Hughes, Fiona Cook, Al Wunder, David Corbet, Janice Florence, Andrew Gray and Peter Trotman. My intention was to include a cross-section of artists who are involved in activities at Cecil Street Studio, but without being exhaustive. Hughes and Cook were interviewed because of their positions as Directors of the studio and because Hughes performs regularly in Conundrum with State of Flux. Al Wunder was interviewed because of the teaching practice he maintains at Cecil St Studio and because of his influence on the activities there. David Corbet, Janice Florence and Andrew Gray were interviewed as regular performers at Conundrum in the two founding groups, State of Flux and Five Square Metres. The other members of these two groups were also invited to take part, but declined for

organized and operating without governmental or financial support. It is about small-scale activity and about spreading this activity out over a long period of time in a slow unraveling that enables the work to be fit in around the requirements of making a living. Many of the practitioners are professionals in the performing arts, but some are not. But they sustain an improvisation practice in a sheltered poverty, separate from their employment, suspicious or defensive about responding to the dictates and compromises of particular funding bodies, and consequently remaining free of their influence.

In an indirect fashion, the roots of this community can, I believe, be traced back to developments in the late 1960s and early 1970s in the United States. The radical social changes taking place during this period were actively mirrored by developments in the arts. To be extremely brief about this, artists experimented with ways in which art could reflect the new order of social values and thus challenge the monolithic conformity of the previous generation. The pandemic of experimentation in dance included a surge of interest in improvisation as a way to embody some of the new values. Susan Leigh Foster in her book *Dances That Describe Themselves* describes how during this time, groups of dancers came together to investigate their interest and commitment to improvisation as a way to articulate their social, artistic and political views:

“...improvisation served repeatedly as a site where difference could be acknowledged and accepted. Implemented in diverse artistic contexts, improvisation broke through standardized social regimens by revealing deeply embedded assumptions about status and protocol, unmasking organizations of power and assisting in the instantiation of an alternative, more egalitarian model of social relations. Improvisation also embraced a vision of democracy as an egalitarian, collective struggle to acknowledge difference – racial, gendered, sexual, and class-based – even if it did not always articulate a means for reckoning with, or sorting through these differences.” (Foster, 2003: 64)

various reasons. Peter Trotman was interviewed as an influential performer in the scene and as someone who also maintains a teaching practice at the studio. The interviews were informal but semi-structured and began with a similar series of questions. Each interview became more open-ended as we followed the natural directions of each discussion. I also include myself as an artist who is involved with the community at Cecil Street Studio and therefore include a personal perspective in this paper.

The value-structure Foster describes can not be directly overlaid onto the situation at Cecil Street Studio. This is clearly a different time and place with different sociopolitical agendas which are inevitably reflected in contemporary practices. But the lineage of what takes place in the small community I'm reflecting on can be traced to the era Foster refers to and certain parallels exist in the way the local scene is organized and conducted. While lacking a radical social agenda on which to hang their practice, the artists operating in and around Cecil Street Studio do exhibit a concern for egalitarian social relations and an acceptance of difference or diversity. This connection is primarily embodied in the many types of improvisation and teaching practices articulated at Cecil Street studio. These vary according to the backgrounds of the individuals involved, but the most consistent and visible have been the performance focus of Conundrum, the teaching practice of Al Wunder (to whom I will return in a moment) and the activities of the contact improvisation community.

The dynamic presence of a home-grown contact improvisation community at Cecil Street Studio has recognizable and, to some extent, deliberate ties to the ethos of early contact improvisation. Contact improvisation as a true child of the late 60's and early 70s embodies the ambition to work and live life on principles of openness, democracy, equality and communalism through the sharing of weight and control between dancers. As Cynthia Novack notes, early contact improvisation was akin to 'folk art' in that it

attracted the participation of people who would never have considered taking an "art" dance class in ballet or modern dance and who wanted a social experience as part of their dancing. (Novack, 1990: 199-200)

The same can be said of the community at Cecil Street, where once a week for the past seven years, a 'contact jam' has attracted enthusiasts of varying levels of skill and experience. In part the appeal of the jam and the reason for its longevity lies in its casual openness. The jams allow for a flexible level of commitment or attendance, do not require a director and almost anyone can participate regardless of their level of expertise. Certainly a status is accorded to the more experienced practitioners, but the event remains anti-hierarchical and inclusive in its structure and philosophy.

The most well-known practitioners of contact improvisation and the instigators of the jam at Cecil Street are the collective group State of Flux. Founded in 1996 by Martin Hughes, Wendy Smith, Janice Florence and Llewellyn Wishart, the group currently consists of Hughes, Smith, Florence, David Corbet and Jacob Lehrer. If not responsible for the establishment of the form in Melbourne, they have certainly ensured its growth and dissemination. Their original mantra of research, teaching and performance has seen them take contact improvisation into a range of contexts, including mixed-ability settings, thus ensuring the survival of the form in Melbourne and to a degree throughout capital city Australia. They have set a deliberate agenda for doing this which includes maintaining an inclusiveness which draws on members' experience of the form in the United States. Hughes describes the group's interest in this and in combining a range of other body awareness practices with their contact practice:

The inclusiveness issue goes across the board in terms of ability and mixed ability or the silo building that seems to permeate dance culture in Australia. The thing that made Flux work is that it wasn't just me coming back from the States and trying to teach on my own, or Wendy teaching Skinner Releasing on her own, or Llewellyn doing BMC on his own, or Janice either. It was the four of us getting together, the collaboration, that sustained us. We were four, so there was this agreement that at least there would be 3 other people there doing class with us. But it became so much more than that because we had 3 other people telling their networks about the classes. So you actually pull in more people. At the same time, creatively and in terms of our research, we had this extraordinary resource amongst the four of us. You know, there was Janice in the [wheel] chair which was extraordinarily galvanizing. And then there was Llewellyn, Australia's only BMC practitioner at the time, Wendy, still Australia's only qualified Skinner Releasing person. And the conversations and practice and investigation and research that went on in that group was of an incredibly high quality. It was the kind of stuff we had all spent a lot of money to go overseas for and we were getting it all right here in our back yard. And then passing it on and the excitement and energy of that drew more people in (Hughes, interview, 2004).

State of Flux's initial interest was in researching and practicing the form but also in showing what they were doing to an audience. As one of the groups responsible for

initiating the performance event *Conundrum*, they found a logical and convenient home for the event at Cecil Street Studio. The other founding group of the event is the theatre-based improvisation group 5 Square Metres who blend the physical with the verbal in their emphasis on comedy, narrative and character. Both groups have been through changes to their membership but currently 5 Square Meters ironically has just 3 members with Clare Bartholomew, Michael Hurwood and Andrew Gray. A consistent theme for both groups and for all of the artists circling Cecil Street, is that investigations into improvisation require practice in performance and that this involves generating your own opportunities for this to happen. Cecil Street artists seem intent on a long-term strategy for the development of their practice. They are interested in working slowly and continuously, but over a long period of time. Until recently, the emphasis for *Conundrum* has not been on the delivery of a consistent performance product but in discovery and investigation through performance. Groups try out what they have been working on in the studio. Individual's inherent idiosyncrasies and particular strengths are explored and emphasised because a premium is placed on this and because no economic imperatives exist which demand a marketable homogeneity.

The Cecil Street artists also exhibit a communal urge in the way they organize themselves into groups, many of which come and go, or into performances with a range of different works. Groups help share the burden of costs and administration involved in maintaining a rehearsal and performance practice. Members also stimulate and inform each other, creating a ready-made audience for intelligent feedback. Solo practitioners also benefit from the infrastructure and community spirit the Cecil Street model provides. All of these factors combine to make a sustainable and responsive practice within a defined community. The community spirit is also inclusive of people without acknowledged performing arts credentials who simply wish to be a part of that community.

The primary role model of sustainability within this community has been the ongoing presence of Al Wunder. Wunder's commitment to improvisation, and the fact that he has earned a humble living from teaching improvisation for over twenty years, earns him enormous respect in the community. Having never received any form of financial support he stands as an example of artistic survival. Within the community there is a

clear recognition of his contribution to the establishment and ongoing existence of the community. An American expatriate, Wunder arrived in Australia in 1983 and has been consistently teaching improvisation, primarily in Melbourne, since that time. Never seeing himself as a performer he has nonetheless established a model of improvisation that emphasises the practice of improvisation through performance, with the presence of an audience as a primary motivator for discovery and growth.

Having trained as a dancer with the Alwin Nikolais School and company in New York City, Wunder moved to the San Francisco Bay Area in 1970 where he began teaching improvisation and established a performance group called the Berkeley Dance Theatre and Gymnasium. Two of his students and collaborators from that time, Terry Sendgraf and Ruth Zaporah, have continued to practice improvisation, with Zaporah in particular, establishing a distinctive and significant body of work in the United States. In talking about his time in the San Francisco region Wunder describes a collective spirit and communalism which has come to inform his approach to teaching today:

When I first arrived there Anna Halprin was the bigwig there and we were also doing improvisation. And there was the Blake Street Hawkeyes who came from an acting background and they just wanted to do physical Theatre and they were doing this improvisation and experimental stuff. And then in 72 or 73 the Contact people passed through doing what they called ReUnion and two of them hung around on the West Coast. A guy named Curt Siddall...he and 4 other guys started a male Contact group called Mangrove...We all did classes with each other. We studied with each other and we developed an audience and student base. We went back and forth and developed a wonderful mixture of styles... It didn't feel like competition as such, it was just a union of different styles and we were really intrigued about how [to] mix this stuff up, how [to] get it all working together...At its height there were probably 100 people who were basically audience/students and who studied first with one group and then another. All the groups were giving performances and they would do ongoing series and we would go and watch each other. Everybody was studying with everybody else and performing (Wunder, interview, 2004).

Upon his arrival in Melbourne Wunder established, with his wife Lynden Nichols, the improvisation group Theatre of the Ordinary and he began teaching improvisation. Many improvisation performers with a range of different approaches and mediums

have been through his classes. The list of dancers, actors and musicians includes Andrew Morrish, Peter Trotman, David Wells, Lynn Santos, Nick Papas, Penny Baron, Martin Hughes, Wendy Smith, Janice Florence, Andrew Gray, Clare Bartholomew, Michael Hurwood, Barry Laing, Greg Dyson, Warren Burt, Helen Mountford, Rinske Ginsberg, Sandra Pascuzzi, Anne O’Keefe, Jillian Pearce, Sally Smith, Suzanne Hurley, Clare Heywood, Nicky Fletcher, Christina Sheperd, Martin Kwasner and myself. The length of this list is an indication of the span of his influence and the diversity of excellent performers who have studied with him. They come and go, sometimes returning to refresh their understanding of his method, but also meeting other performers with whom they form alliances and establish groups. These performers have, in turn, influenced another generation, with their commitment to performing regularly and teaching their own methods. There is a connective loop between Wunder’s classes and the performances his ex-student’s give whereby the performances stimulate new interest and generate new students who in turn attend Wunder’s classes as a way to learn the form.

Wunder’s work is often used as a point of reference from which performers diverge and extend, often reacting against aspects of his method they find too simplistic or unsuitable. There are those that cannot find merit in his approach and Melbourne-based artists working with improvisation who have never studied with him. But many continue to use his underlying structure and philosophy even if they elaborate his ideas in more sophisticated or personal ways. His work has also created a way in which audiences and practitioners alike can talk about improvised performances, a kind of common language that renders the work meaningful and commonly accessible. These include the use of ‘scores’ to define the parameters of a performance or alternatively, a refusal to use scores, the centrality of the body within performance, the acceptance of randomly jumping between ‘pure’ dance and representational theatre and the use of improvised music or an improvised ‘placement’ of pre-recorded music. What goes on and how it unfolds is primarily understood through the application of Wunder’s methodology.

Wunder’s model for student performances, his In-house and Out-house performances, has also set an informal template for a range of public performance events that have sprung up over the past twenty years. Events such as *The Flummery Room* with

Trotman and Morrish and which ran for close to two years in 1994/1995, *A Year of Fridays* which Wunder organized and where a performance occurred every Friday for an entire year and *Conundrum* all owe allegiance to this model. At the core of this model for improvisation is a focus on practicing performing *by* performing. Performances are commonly stripped back to basics out of economic necessity. They de-prioritize the framing of the events and focused instead on maintaining a continuity of practice which develops the artists as performers over a long period of time. Events are casual, with a range of short performances from different groups or performers, low production values, informal seating and a close relationship with the audience. The order of events is traditionally decided on the night and there could be a mix of professional performing artists and amateurs between whom no theoretical distinction is made. In my view, it is this approach, and the influence of Wunder's teaching, which have determined the character of the performance activity at Cecil Street Studio.

The enthusiasm the Cecil Street participants can sometimes display for the processes of improvisation can border on cult logic. But even if the enthusiasm is more tempered it certainly promotes a community sensibility which is paradoxically at once both inclusive and exclusive. It is initially a club that anybody can join. No prior skills or training are required to do Wunder's classes, for example. The limits of the student's performance and the form of expression - whether it is music or movement or language based, whether it is a theatrical narrative or an abstract dance - are all defined entirely by the students themselves. In most performances the framing and aesthetic are simple and everything from the virtuosic to the mundane is theoretically celebrated. Ordinarity is not demeaned or undervalued. Humour is a common element and there is readiness for performers to try comedy and for audiences to support this. In Wunder's classes, an absolute beginner can perform something entirely engaging and feel the attendant rush of excitement. Wunder's refusal to overtly direct his students places them in a relatively powerful position of control and ownership. Performers and audiences share the common experience of not knowing where the performance will go and what will happen.

But it is potentially also exclusive in the way those who have learnt the form own it to the exclusion of those who have not. It is a form that does not fit recognizable formats

for performance. As a hybrid feeding off a range of disciplines, it is acceptable to jump quickly between mediums without explanation. Narratives are interrupted or discarded before being resolved, movement sequences dropped suddenly as the performers follow their impulses and attempt to negotiate the performance process. It is up to the audience to actively engage with this process and find a personal interpretation of the results. While more practiced performers are consistently able to form coherent structures within their work, beginners find this difficult. Even experienced performers face the prospect of failure. Unless an audience member is sufficiently familiar with the inherent nature of the form then it can sometimes be a confusing experience. It requires practice at interpretation and an acceptance of the possibility for failure.

Participants at Cecil Street events often know each other and can seem like a tightly knit social group or a clique. The performances also act as a social gathering of friends and associates where most people are known to each other. Newcomers to *Conundrum*, for example, can find this alienating – as if there is a membership, the requirements for which are not clear. Publicity for the event is limited and hard for the mainstream audience to even find out about it. It requires initiation from within in that sense. Another criticism that has been leveled is that a kind of bubble mentality exists where the members of the community do not seem to be actively pursuing relationships for their activities with other practices in the performing arts scene.

To finish, what does the future hold for this community? When *Conundrum* performed at the Sylvia Staehli Theatre at Dancehouse in March 2004 the audience numbered over 125 people with many turned away at the door. The popularity and spirit of the night seemed, to many of the *Conundrum* regulars, as a welcome development and offering a different focus and intention for the event. The trajectory into a stronger public profile and the access of higher production values at Dancehouse were seen as an appropriate extension of the event, after so many years of experimentation. Will the emphasis now shift from a laboratory for improvisation to a showcase of its best performers, but with the attendant requirements to provide a more marketable consistency of performance quality? The lease on the building in Cecil Street also expires in 2006 with the current managers Martin Hughes and Fiona Cook unwilling to continue donating their time beyond that date. So the nature of the

community will clearly change, perhaps to fracture, but possibly to morph into a new structure or simply to find a new space. But there is also a newly emerging group of improvisers, who cannot easily get a spot on the program at *Conundrum*. As a consequence a new monthly performance event called *Out of the Ordinary* has emerged at Cecil Street organized by these performers to provide themselves with opportunities to perform. So perhaps, the model will continue and the community will continue to reinvent itself through the participatory act of dancing and improvising and that this uniquely Melbourne community will in fact survive and inspire as a fluid and grass roots example of sustainability.

Reference List

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