

Interject: a choreographer's struggles in one specific site

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Abstract

Interject (a site-specific dance work) was performed on a ledge inside the Gallagher Academy of Performing Arts at the University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand in November 2012. This paper reframes a complex picture of web-like connections and challenges around the relocation and re-envisioning of several site-specific choreographies into one specific site. How do you re-negotiate the dance content in a different site? What are the ramifications of an additional dancer? How do you interact/negotiate with the everyday use of the site? Is it a new work or not? These questions are discussed along with the unpacking and interrogation of my journey and a review of the end product as the choreographer in this process. This reframing will make reference to the past and how it has enriched and informed the expanding field of international site-specific dance (Brown 2010, Kloetzel & Pavlik 2009, Hunter 2005) and this particular project.

Keywords: site-specific, dance, creative process, practice-based, research

Introduction

Interject was a site-specific dance work that combined the elements of space, performance and audience in a fleeting moment, performed on a ledge inside the Gallagher Academy of Performing Arts, University of Waikato, Hamilton, New Zealand in November 2012. Exciting, challenging and problematic for my research was the fact that each time *Interject* was performed it was a fleeting moment which was different on every occasion, opening up the possibilities of multiple perspectives. 'The interaction between the spatial and the performative is ephemeral in nature, existing only in the moment of performance ... It is a perfect synthesis between space, performance and audience'. (Hunter, 2009, p.414).

Concurring with Hunter's assertions that dance is ephemeral and exists only in a moment of time, I feel unsettled and apprehensive; how can I encapsulate this ephemeral site-specific dance performance research? This has been in the 'too hard basket' for a long time and I immediately switch to doing anything and everything else—procrastination strikes with vengeance. I am a Gemini and I would argue that I fit into the stereotype of having two very different sides often tugging at one another for dominance. Maybe there is some truth in the idea that you need to be on the edge in order to create. Maybe I can think of this article as another kind of performance dancing across, off, on, around and between the visual marks on the page with writing, poetry and photographs. This affords me the chance to further grapple with my site-specific dance work, and challenge boundaries within the academic world in which I work.

In order to do this I attempt to reframe a complex picture of web-like challenges and connections around the relocation and re-envisioning of several site-specific

choreographies into one specific site. This challenge is further compounded by a bombardment of questions: How do you re-negotiate the dance content in a different site? What do you gain/lose with relocation? What are the ramifications of an additional dancer? How do you interact/negotiate with the everyday use of the site? Is it a new work or not?

By unpacking these questions through charting my journey as a choreographer, engaging with these works through conversations around process, product and dancers' responses, I hope to embrace ambiguity, tensions, multiple voices and fluid non-fixed boundary crossings. Before charting my journey I begin by unpacking understandings of site-specific performance/dance and provide the background context to the several site-specific dance works that form the focus of this research.

Background

Site work in dance had its beginnings in the 1950s and 1960s and can be traced back to the early experimental work by Cunningham and Cage and other contemporary artists, as well as Kaprow's 'happenings', which shunned theatre spaces, and sought to destabilise the line between art and the everyday. Kloetzel and Pavlik further explain: 'During this era artists in many genres were rebelling against conventional creative processes as well as testing the boundaries between art and everyday life' (2009, p.7,8). Halprin's interest in outdoor spaces, architecture and pedestrian movement influenced two prominent female innovators in site-specific dance, Trisha Brown and Meredith Monk. These two artists made many site works, Brown with her interest in the moving in unusual ways on structures used harnesses and ropes to walk down outdoor walls and send movement messages across rooftops, while Monk used historical information and played with the extension of time and different locations.

The term site-specific 'refers to the fact that these dances take a particular place as both inspiration and setting for the dance' (Kloetzel and Pavlik, 2009, p.1). Stock (2011) asserts that 'there are certain definitional precepts that underpin site-specific art and performance' (p.1) namely that it usually occurs in public space through a process of intervention. Stock elaborates that 'in their encounters, artists use the site as a stimulus for the conceptualisation and creative realisation of "what Hunter (2007) calls a process on interruption"'. Hunter and Barbour (2010) both agree that 'dance performance created in response to and performed within a specific site or location, where dance and movement are the dominant components as opposed to theatre- or installation-derived genres' (Hunter, 2005, p.367). 'Site-specific dance can thus be understood as a collaboration with, and response to, the elements of a particular space, including emotional and sensory experience as well as design and structure, and social and cultural history' (Barbour, 2010, p.122). Site-specific work, according to Kaye (2000) is, however, not an uncontested term—it is elusive, slippery and resistant to definition. Monk, a pioneering dance artist, compares her role in making site-specific dance to that of an archaeologist 'to excavate a space and let it speak' (Monk, cited in Kaye, 2000, p.203). Kloetzel asserts that the critical terms *place* and *space* are 'contested among practitioners of site-specific performance—as well as among theorists in fields from geography to architecture—

space and place can leave our analytical efforts in a muddle' (2010, p.133). However Keidan argues that:

With Live Art, questions of place come with the territory and since the 1980s this ever-expanding and shape-shifting field of practice challenged assumptions and changed the rules about who is making art, how they are making it, who they making it for and where they are making it (2006, p.16).

Koplowitz (2009, p. 82) asks the same question in order to move beyond the limitations of definitions and categories: 'It all comes down to one thing: is making site art worth it?' He claims that the rise of activity in site forms attests to its value, and more importantly that 'dancers who work on site have discovered that anything that blurs the boundaries between art and daily life, that brings people closer together, and that helps connect people to their environment is worthy of the investment of time' (p.82). Brown (2010) does this through her interests '...in making connections between bodies and environments ... and in shifting audience expectations about how and where one might experience a dance' (p.58). In blurring boundaries Hunter (2007) argues that 'embedded within the process is a complex interplay of power relations concerning the artist, community and the site interface'. The interaction of these tensions is for her as a site choreographer/director 'one of the most interesting challenges' (p.112).

Methodology

The methodology for this research is an amalgam of critical personal narrative and self-study, combined with arts-based practice. My research focuses on the process of site-specific dance making as an embodied way of knowing and as a research method (Barbour, 2006). The methodology is multilayered, embracing feminist practices and using dialogue as a self-embodied dance. Creative process, still and moving images, journal entries and discussions with dancers all inform the research method. In order to initiate a meaningful and respectful dialogue I begin to position myself by dancing the beginning in conversation with my moving body. Choreographer Brown (2010) states that choreography situates the body in time and space, and within site-specific dance performance Hunter explains that the body gives form to ideas and responses to the site (2005, p.368). 'Dance as bodies moving through time and space, provide an evocative vehicle to engage in a creative dialogue with, and interrogation of, site' (Stock, 2011. p.1).

Context

The focus of attention for this research began with the making and performance of site-specific works around the campus at the University of Waikato during 2009, 2010, 2011 and 2012. I was interested in raising the profile of dance around the campus and engaging through dynamic exchange between dancing bodies, the architecture and function of the chosen sites. This practice-based research¹ began with the creation of a series of site works, which I describe below.

Interject Disrupt Vanish 1

The sites chosen, three outdoor and one indoor, had interesting features and architecture that aroused my curiosity as I surveyed the campus looking for potential sites. They were all access ways: a corridor, steps and a ramp leading to a lecture theatre block, benches on a board walk and a table and flat landing area between two flights of steps. I was interested in sites that had a volume of foot traffic at different times during the day. Before beginning the process of developing the choreography for the first site-specific project I created my own 'No' Manifesto:²

- No to longer than 3 minutes;
- No to 4/4 time;
- No to studio rehearsals;
- No to traditional performance spaces;
- No to distinction between public and private;
- No to proscenium arch space;
- No to fourth wall;
- No to stylised costume.

But:

- Yes to outdoor and indoor sites around campus;
- Yes to *Interject Disrupt Vanish*.

Less than three minutes would allow for the aim of interjecting, disrupting and vanishing to be achieved. Avoiding 4/4 time music I hoped would prevent any associations with pop music and its respective YouTube videos. As the performers vanished I wanted them to blend into the other users of the space by being dressed like the general student population. Each different site had its own specific features and functions but there was a connection to the other sites through the shared movement vocabulary at any one point. They all served as various pathways, allowing individuals to traverse between and within the architecture of the campus.

Outside rehearsals and performances was a moveable feast. The dancers worked in bare feet and this is where a choreographer becomes cleaner and sweeper also, to remove foreign objects such as cigarette butts, grit and tomato sauce left in the space. Despite this we had four performances on different days and at different times at each site and *Interject, Disrupt, Vanish 1* was videoed and photographed to document the performances. The title *Interject, Disrupt, Vanish 1* encapsulated the aims of this project—the three performers were interjected into the chosen site, they disrupted everyday occurrences by dancing and then vanished by leaving casually.

Second and third site works 2010, 2011

Between Spaces was the second in this series of site works created in 2010, this time set in the Gallagher Academy of Performing Arts, a building, designed by Warren and Mahoney architects in 2000, which has won several design awards. This site provided an interesting range of possibilities to play with. *Between Spaces* interacted with an exhibition in the entrance corridor, steel girders and a large wooden ledge framed by giant windows in the foyer, which were open to the outside

during part of the piece. This allowed for outside/inside interaction in several layers such as performers, environment or perspective, and introduced an element of the unexpected. I returned to this space for the final work.



Image 1 Performers Marie Hermo Jensen and Kirsty Russell in *Between Spaces*
Photo: Sue Cheesman (2010)

Interject, Disrupt, Vanish 2 in 2011 saw me revisit one of the previous sites from *Interject, Disrupt, Vanish 1*, namely the benches on the boardwalk by the lake, in order to have a more in-depth choreographic focus and to further mine the possibilities of this site. For this piece I had three new dancers. This time I also had a 'want' list to:

- include dancers' strengths in terms of their varied dance backgrounds;
- embrace quirkiness and an element of unpredictability;
- add in balances on the seats that looked spectacular against the lake and trees backdrop;
- broaden the movement content and not restrict myself only to pedestrian movement and its abstraction that I had worked with the previous time;
- enter and exit along the boardwalk on either side of the bench seats;
- further mine the site's possibilities;
- have dancers wearing bright colours;
- build on previously developed rhythmic gestural phrases.

This 'want' list provided me with guidance and challenge during the creative process, allowing for a greater depth of interchange between the site and function, the atmosphere, the choreographer and the dancers. The result from my perspective as choreographer/director was a much deeper and more satisfying performance product.



Image 2 *Interject Disrupt Vanish 2* Photo: Cheri Waititi (2011)

Working in the final site

The final site-specific challenge consisted of crystallising the *Interject*, *Disrupt*, *Vanish 1 and 2* and *Between Spaces* site performances into the creation of a new work, *Interject*. I returned to this particular site containing the large wooden ledge, framed by giant windows in the foyer of the Gallagher Academy of Performing Arts building. Visitors to this building often describe it as beautiful. This site initially attracted me as a choreographer because of its stunning architecture coupled with the sense of light illuminating the space. The cream coloured wide wooden ledge is situated in a giant foyer with stairs leading to the second floor on one side, and houses a coffee bar with an entrance to one of the theatres opposite the ledge. I agree with Wilkie's (2002) point of view that part of the appeal of this site was the evocative architecture.

Before making the piece I sat on and in the site on many occasions, watching users and noticing the architectural design and features from above, below and on the ledge with the lines, sharp angles and spatial orientation of the platform changing, depending on the perspective from which I was viewing it. There were no curves evident and the space was covered with rectangles. I saw many more possibilities and interconnections by revisiting it. This provided a basis for my improvisations and subsequently movement motifs.

This time I had a 're' manifesto based on Balken's (1998) creativity thoughts, but expanded the names to accommodate many of the processes which needed to be re-envisioned for the pieces in a new space:

- Re member
- Re call
- Re invent
- Re locate
- Re encounter
- Re choreograph
- Re form
- Re fine
- Re trace
- Re design
- Re structure

These acted as ways of interrogating the content in this particular site from a variety of perspectives.

The allure of working outside a traditional theatre space has its challenges, and for choreographers in all site work, whether large scale or small, there is a multitude of logistical and organisational issues to work through. For example, in two of the previous site-specific outdoor works the vagaries of the weather played havoc with our schedule and its slippery presence was constantly negotiated. In this case it was the variety of functions the building provided, coupled with the everyday use of the space. The foyer is often used for conference lunches and can function as a bar pre and post performances, as well as housing a display area. Students are often found lounging on the ledge, chatting. The foot traffic and different users of the space vary greatly over the course of a day. When rehearsing we were constantly interacting and negotiating with the everyday users of the site, often leading to discussions with the programmers and users of the space. Since this is an Academy of Performing Arts they were very receptive to making all things possible. One example was the outside hiring of the space, with people holding opera auditions upstairs, meaning that they needed to use the access on the right hand side of our performance area. I unreservedly agreed to access when needed and because we were in the foyer with no sound accompaniment, both activities were able to take place simultaneously.

Another challenge or advantage, depending on your perspective, was the high visibility of the creative process. In this site the dancers and I became acutely aware that the choreographic development and process were constantly on display, in the public eye from day one, especially when rehearsing at lunchtime. I noticed the following reactions and responses:

- Walk on by;
- Stop for a while;
- Voyeur at a distance;
- Café dwellers glancing over;
- Observer/audience;

- Lunch eaters on the ledge oblivious to us dancing in close proximity;
- Curious;
- Commentators;
- Opinion givers—I see you are at it again;
- Questioners—what are you doing?

One of the performers commented that she thought she would be put off performing in such a public space, but that she loved seeing the looks and reactions from the people watching. Who is watching whom? 'Space makes possible different kinds of relationships between dancers and audiences but in turn is transformed according to the dancer's relations with it' (Brown, 2010 p.65). I suggest this is a blurring of the traditional notions of performance and spectatorship challenging 'a single unifying viewpoint from which and to which all points converge' (Briginshaw, 2001 p.11). Challenging the concept of space as a three-dimensional container I embraced Grosz's viewpoint of space as '... a moment of becoming, of opening up, and proliferation, a passage from one place to another, a space of change, which changes with time' (Grosz, 2001 p.119). When working in the various sites, both physical and in my head, I find myself frequently engaging and grappling with the following interfaces:

- The in-betweens;
- Place, space, non-space;
- Outside, inside;
- Inside, inside;
- Between spaces.

Briginshaw argues that 'the rationale unitary subject inherited from Descartes is reduced to finite co-ordinates in time and space, where time and space are seen as unproblematic, quantifiable and measurable in a scientific and mathematical way' (2001, p.9). A further assertion is that 'Many postmodern dances play with and blur boundaries of the body in different ways, disrupting, and challenging the fixity of identities seen in the context of binaries' (Briginshaw 2001, p.10). When the above is specifically applied to site-specific dance work Brown makes an important point that 'we can think of the "taking place" of choreography as an emergent matrix of relationships shaped by states of flux between body and the built, performers and audience, corporeality and virtuality, ephemerality and the seemingly permanent' (2010, p.58).

My 'know no boundaries' Gemini was in full swing, revelling in the turbulence that surrounded me as we endeavoured to create this final site work in the series. Returning to this site afforded me the opportunity to develop and deepen content already made here, and to rework it for four dancers, not two. I began by playing around the architectural and spatial qualities of the space. Interesting possibilities started to develop—stacking up, moulding over and lying on, flicking up and over, balancing on and traversing across or leaning up against. The table piece is a direct response to watching people at lunch time; although abstracted through size of gesture and time signatures it was a direct comment on human interactions. I think at this point it is important to note that the placing of the male and female dancers

opposite each other, divided by a table, meant onlookers related to the situation and social interactions, rather than to the architecture of the site.

Using the site, dancers traversed the platform from one side to the other in straight lines and also came forward and back across the space to perch on the edge. I called on my choreographer's experience to make decisions on structuring the work. An important underlying parameter when making this work was to maintain the qualities of intrigue and quirkiness through a sense of unpredictability. I used radical juxtaposition of movement phrases, splicing together unrelated images that allowed me to avoid a chronological order and a narrative.

Renegotiating the dance content from a different site was not without its complexities. The stack-up from the 2010 work was a powerful image originally; in the relocation, moving it against the wall on the ledge with the addition of another dancer became a different kind of image which made a visually striking start to the *Interject* 2012.



Image 3: Dancers Zildjian Robinson, Helene Burgstaller, Beka Meadows and Natalie Sangster in *Interject* 2012 Photo: Cheri Waititi (2012)

I muse:

*Multiplicity of connections, interactions, adaptations
bombard me at any one point in time.*

Encounters, convergences fluid not fixed, unexpected intriguingly complex.

Interconnectivity, collisions.

Architecture of the space.

Surfaces, textures, bodies, performers.

Audience, observers, passers by, users of the space, light, the weather.

Connections.

Distinction between public and private spaces blurred.

No fourth wall.

Process interactive alive, constantly shifting, unpredictable.



Image 4: Performer Helene Burgstaller, in *Interject*. Photo: Cheri Waititi (2012)

The one new dancer entered the space and was keen to play along the ledge, developing a range of movement material. She is a real risk taker and as soon as we got into the space she was up on the edge leaning out, balancing and turning upside down. It may be argued that new and interesting performance dynamics were created from the addition of a dancer and the re-engagement with the physical aspects of the space, further mining the possibilities of this site.

Working in this site dancers commented:

'... the environment work changes my relationship to a space' (Natalie Sangster);

'... different sites and the possibilities that presents me as a dancer' (Zildjian Robinson);

'... this one in particular has been really challenging, interesting—working in an environment that is constantly changing adds to the piece' (Beka Meadows);

'... trying options that celebrated the site was an exciting challenge for me' (Helene Burgstaller).

I would argue that I did challenge the accepted codes and conventions of traditional presentations. Although the piece was performed in daylight and in the evening with minimal lighting, by placing the work outside in the foyer where the audience was free to move and was standing for the duration is different from the protocols of sitting in a darkened theatre space, waiting for the lights to go up and witnessing the performance on stage.

Another difference from the theatre was that there was no distance between the audience and the performers, which as Stock (2011) states endows the audience as well as the performer with performative agency. The audience members brought with them a wealth of prior experiences of this space, which served to inform their viewing. Conversely, in site-specific performance the space is not neutral either and 'is altered by the presence of the performers and the choreographer's intervention in the site and the work itself' (Hunter, 2005 p.377). A reviewer wrote: '... the live piece animated both the design and the function/role of the foyer area in a playful and thoughtful manner' (Ashley, 2013, p. 21).

Reframing a complex picture of web-like connections around several site-specific choreographies, I share my musings with the following impressions, as I relive this process remembering, tracing visual marks through my body, moving and opening up the possibility for multiple readings.

A bricolage of choreographic bites

My body moves bombarded with multiple possibilities

Interactive alive—the lure of site

Connection, interactions, adaptations

Jumbled phrases order—spoon, advanced pilates, four corners, jumpie, pairs

Inter-connections—blurred boundaries

Texture, hard, elongated, rectangular

Strips of creamy lemon wood
Dense solid
Surface on surface
Space in space
Skin on wood
Slide, splinter, puncture
Ledge to table
Creamy, smooth, solid
Bodies stack, tip, lever, nestle, jump, mould, slide
Tictaking
Brightly coloured moving
Unpredictable, constantly shifting
Fear of falling
On the edge
Lines fracture at joints
Jump, fall, balance, slide
Momentarily stack up
Multiplicity of connections, interactions, adaptations
Encounters, convergences, fluid not fixed
Distillation
Idiosyncratic
Unexpected, intriguing, complex, quirky

Conclusion

It would generally be agreed, despite the complexities, that there is a continuum that Wilkie (2002) explains draws distinctions between levels of site-specificity along which one can categorise a site work. In considering all the works, it could be argued that this is a series with the common thread of all being performed outside a traditional theatre, that aims to challenge expectation of where and how dance can be performed. Within the series there are two pairings (that is two works performed at the same sites) and these pairings, it could be argued, exhibit traces of family resemblances.

Although there were resonances of *Between Spaces*—the original work performed in the foyer site—I would argue that the last work, *Interject*, was not purely replication or reconstruction giving the viewer new realisations of the everyday in this same site. In reality very little movement from other sites transferred across and I became acutely aware of the specificity of each of the sites and their respective generated movement content. Much of the movement content for *Interject* was informed and directly related to the striking architecture, especially the ledge.

It is important to note that all rehearsals took place in the last site at varying times during the day and evening. This process was influenced by the changing functions and atmosphere from day to evening within this specific site, and could be seen as part of what Hunter (2007) called the intangible (atmosphere, phenomenon). However I agree that faint traces of the other site content could be found in *Interject*,

but it could be argued that these changed from site adaptive to site specific by being embedded and mixed with the majority of the content directly informed by this site's functions and architecture. This meant that this site 'became a source and not merely a repository of creative ideas' (Stock, 2011. p.2).

The question 'is this a new work or not?' implies a binary yes or no. In talking about the codification and categorisation of this work Monk cautions: '... I think that when things get codified or named, then something dies. I feel art is really about working with the unnameable. So as soon as you name it, something of the mystery is lost' (Monk, 2009, p.37). Categorisation is problematic and there seems to be very little allowance for grey areas between definitions on the margins that challenge the either/or, and push boundaries. Threading through all these works was a certain recognisable nuance, which I would argue is attributed to my interests as the sole choreographer. Maybe it is a matter of degree to which it could be argued that it was a new work.

Through returning to the same site many more possibilities were mined by the creation of new material and new relationships and meanings. Four different dancers from the original two brought further adaptation and change, and a different physicality. Furthermore, all the content for *Interject* was extensively filtered through my 're' manifesto in the site, making for a rich dialogue and creative exchange between the dance, the site, the process and the choreographer and dancers. Taking all the above into account it seems that the weight of evidence points towards the notion of a new work.

These site-specific performances provided opportunities to challenge and unsettle audience/onlookers' expectations of where and how dance is experienced by exposing the community to a range of site-specific dance performances in varying locations around the campus. I suggest that the interruptions into these sites, coupled with the dynamic relationship between the site, choreographer and dancers and audience/onlookers, allowed for new meanings and perspectives to emerge.

1. It would generally be agreed that practice-based research in dance is the investigation of artistic practices as research in performance and that this kind of research has given rise to new concepts and methods in the generation of new knowledge. Barbour (2006)

2. In using a 'no' manifesto I made a connection with Yvonne Rainer's 1965 NO manifesto which was a radical way of considering dance at that time.

<http://www.1000manifestos.com/yvonne-rainer-no-manifesto/>

I would like to acknowledge all dancers as contributors to all the different site-specific dance works mentioned in this article.

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Personal communication

Helene Burgstaller, Hamilton, 20 November 2012

Beka Meadows, Hamilton, 20 November 2012

Natalie Sangster, Hamilton, 20 November 2012

Zildjian Robinson, Hamilton, 20 November 2012

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Biography

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