

Rethinking Dance Writing

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I am interested in expressing the metamorphoses of forms into new bodies.
(Picasso, in Brisbane Gallery of Modern Art, 2008)

The focus of this paper is an instance of practice led research. I will discuss the specific processes embedded in creating and performing a tightly scored improvisation work – named *The Little peeling Cottage* – in which choreographic writing was a central aspect in the dance structure and in performance. This practice led research engages with the politics of translation and the concept of writing as a form of listening and attending to movement. Choreographic writing is differentiated as drawn words, handwritten as a performance duet practice, with one dancer manifesting their dance in bodily movement, and the other manifesting their dance through the site of the page. When spoken aloud, this writing becomes a dance partner, its vocal and affective tone and qualities active generators for movement phrases, its improvisatory poetics and cadences navigation points for movement sensation and initiation. This practice aligns with Andre Lepecki's assertion that

movement is that which releases writing from any representational hopes, from any illusion of its subserviently serving a fixed "conscious presence of full intention" of anyone who produces a mark, thus writing as movement performs a displacement, a dislodging with profound political consequences.
(Lepecki, 2008, p. 2)

The Context of Practice Led Research

There is a growing body of research through practice that explores, as performance theorist Susan Melrose (2006) would put it, practitioner theoretical modes of research. Haseman (2007) discusses the term practice led research as a relatively recent methodological term that 'asserts the primacy of practice and insists that because creative practice is both ongoing and persistent; practitioner researchers do not merely "think" their way through or out of a problem, but rather they "practice" to a resolution' (Haseman, 2007, p. 147). In dance studies, the practice of dance as a form of

knowledge has led to a paradigm shift in academic research methodology, which has challenged logocentric assumptions of knowledge and created space for embodied, transitional, relational and live work to extend the realms of academic discourse. Performance researcher Carol Brown (1997, p. 135) discusses this move as embracing the 'messy materiality of bodies' and the complexity, ambiguity and ephemerality of dance processes and their modes of articulation. As this paradigm has grown, so have the number of rich examples of practitioner based dance research and the diverse range of writing about practices, rehearsal processes, collaborative forms of decision-making and other forms of knowledge particular to performance making. Susan Melrose proposes that the field of performance studies is in need of language to discuss practitioner-based processes such as intuition and forms of disciplinary specific decision-making. She asks; 'How might we identify the expert knowledge-practices, their operations and boundary-markers, within work which we also require to be challenging, innovative, and to offer new insights? And what might be its most productive relationship with writing?' (Melrose, 2002, p. 4).

Research to identify 'modes of expert knowledge practice' have grown exponentially over the last twenty years, with examples of writing around performance extending articulation of how performance is known in a wide range of contexts. Performance maker/writers such as Carol Brown, Mathew Goulish, Emilyn Claid, Deborah Hay, Simon Ellis, Eva Karczag and very many others write with fluidity and innovation in a way that greatly extends understanding of process-based approaches to dance. The work of these researchers reflects the usage of page spaces as central sites of choreographic research on many levels. As deLahunta & Shaw (2004) suggest, a choreographer's interaction with pages creates 'a catalyst for creation' (p. 67) through notation processes such as drawing, noting feedback and engendering a multitude of forms of conceptual development. In this paper, I will discuss a dance project where the logics of writing and dancing spilled into each other, engaging in a mode of precarious, creative and tangential translation.

Performance Structure

Rehearsals for *The Little peeling Cottage* emerged as part of rehearsals for a full-length work named *Camper*, a duet that I co-choreographed and danced with long time collaborator Val Smith. We decided we wanted to make a work in an unconventional space. I was reading a lot of Guillermo Gomez Pena's work (Gomez Pena, 2005) at the time and was interested in audience interaction. We agreed we did not want to go through the politics, production issues and sense of separation from the world inherent in making a work for a theatre. In discussion of our ideal performance space we wanted the work to be available to non-traditional audiences, for passers-by to be invited into it, for it to merge with public spaces. We thought an empty shop front facing the street could be perfect, and then we considered the bureaucracy of councils and leases. We thought it would be cool to make work in a house, and invite the audiences in as guests. Then Val proposed that we find a caravan. A caravan can be moved around from place to place, has an intimate performance space, creates a sense that the audience are directly inventing

the work through their participation in it, and if we found a caravan, we would have access to our performance/rehearsal space for a long period of time. *The Little peeling Cottage* was created as one of the four five minute works that I choreographed within the larger *Camper* work. Throughout the process I was warming up and rehearsing with Val for a range of dance works made as part of the larger *Camper* work, which heightened our kinaesthetic engagement as duet partners (me writing and Val dancing).

Choreographically *The Little peeling Cottage* is a very simple, specifically structured and refined improvisation score. Through repetition of the same improvisation score throughout rehearsals and a two-month performance period, the organisational elements of this work became very precise, while at the same time the improvisatory nature of movement and writing meant the work remained unpredictable and alive.

Sensoriums of listening

In the first *Little peeling Cottage* rehearsal Val and I had warmed up with body work (massage into contact improvisation), and it was my turn to lead our choreographic process. We both had journals at the side of the space. I took mine and asked Val to improvise on the theme; 'What is on my mind right now?'. This was an open improvisation that could move between text and movement, as Val chose. I was to call 'end' after 7 minutes. As she moved, I wrote. I wrote down the words she said; 'I like it, but the roof', following her movement via words and drawn shapes on the page. We were engaging with the sensorium of what listening is in the context of dance feedback. Val was attending to somatic sensations, imaginative narratives, the space she was in and possibly a sense of compositional structure. I was attending to her movement. One of the ways that my listening was enacted was by my pencil scratching alongside her movement, which constituted a tangential listening, partial, untrustworthy; an outcome of concentrating attention as cellularly and completely as possible; an experiment in allowing words to unfold.

19 June 07

1:

There's a pressing forward into action/a pressing forward into inaction.

'Sure I'm sure'

Like a waiting line

The weight between your head and the roof.

'I like it, but the roof'.

Divided in half.

Leaning

Throat and scapula

Barometer

Field day

2:

Tipping granules of small memories across a rain lit something

Open the clavicle from inside the marrow

Waiting, watching the weather

A sudden pressing of lungs
Relationships between trip of the head and the bowls of
knee joints quickly raising. Diagonals.

After 7 minutes, I called 'end' and Val allowed her movement to find its ending. Val then rested while I read my response to her solo aloud (her body porous to the qualities of tone, pitch, cadence, image). Before my reading we discussed how the piece would develop; after I finished reading she continued her solo, this time for 4 minutes (the dance took less time with each repetition as embedded in the structure of the work was a condensation of the material with each rehearsal) and I wrote as before. We were considering this development as a continuation of the first solo and of the writing. Val then worked on re-finding the logic of the first solo, allowing any threads from my reading to enter into her movement, and seeing where the work took her. Again, at the designated time, I called 'end', and Val rested while I read my translation of / response to her moving. My reading after Val's second development of the solo completed our rehearsal. In the next *peeling Cottage* rehearsal we began with the last piece of writing from the rehearsal before. Each return to the structure of *The Little peeling Cottage* improvisation continued the work of the piece. The imaginative landscape of the work was jostled into emergence as Val listened and moved in response to words that were born out of attendance to her movement from a previous time. We began days or weeks later with the last piece of writing, so the written 'documentation' of the work lengthened, a snake shedding its tail. The snake was the dancing, the shed skins were the texts, just as Andre Lepecki (2004, p. 133) said, 'all documentation provides is a stiff body.' Except these skins were and are not stiff; they are malleable, forming generators of memory that bear the traces and stains of movement.

3:
The first thing is the audibility of almost sighing that amount of pressure that
pushes the limits of breathing.
Leaning. The corner of a room makes the slightest indentation upon the soft
bone of the skull.
Kick time itself.
Check the engineering of the occiput.
Jail. Continuum of outside into inside
The interlocking design of your hands.

These texts are more like distillations of listening than an attempt to document or to freeze an ephemeral moment. Movement is not described or critiqued but evoked in a collaborative, rhizomatic sense. In order to write inside the flow of movement the writing is conceptualised as an inventive practice that requires the same kind of attention and technical commitment as dancing. The muscles of attending and listening are also translating muscles, constantly interpreting, bridging or intensifying the space between self and other. As Miranda Tufnell (2004, p. 63) writes, 'Writing continues the imaginative journey begun in moving, or watching a partner move, dancing the dance on in language...Words and phrases sourced in this way continue to build upon the imaginative field of the moving.'

Watching Val 4: It's interesting how the temperature shifts pore by pore as the woollen weight of my brown socks rain to the floor. Also I can feel the cold air upon the tense muscles of my raised throat. The palest parts of me are my hands and feet, hand wraps like a plant. Hard roof, beams, roof beams bare as muscles immersed in movement.

Performance maker Michelle Minnick (2003, p. 102) describes the way that writing informs her studio process: 'This writing, which marks the first steps on what will be a long journey, becomes a part of the dramaturgical process, another way of listening.' Minnick's article *Attending: A Dramaturgy of the Flesh* discusses a process that moved between poetic translation, theatre, dance, and dramaturgical collaboration. Processes of listening, translation and the play between embodiment and language thread throughout her process;

Words, if they live at all, if they can be considered (attended to) as objects, as forms in space, live in a space of passage between one cultural meaning to the next... Words have flesh, are tactile, can be skin for touching. Words have a voice that precedes us, a voice which gives our mouths its shape in making sense out of sound...The words remain alive, carrying perhaps their originary power, but also a power that always recreates itself anew, finding a new body inside my throat, a new dance in the air between me and whoever is there to hear me.

(Minnick, 2003, p. 107)

It must be noted that the distillation of my attendance to Val's movement through words, was, in rehearsal or performance, written on paper and always communicated to her through speech. Luce Irigaray (2002, p. 15) writes of speech that it is 'not a part of the body but a flesh that goes beyond the body without destroying it, amputating it: transmuted physical allowing a communication before and after an immediately bodily touching.' The qualities of sound, tone, pitch, cadence, the spacing between words, the quality of my attention carried inside the containers of the letters as they move through diaphragm, throat, the resonating chamber of the mouth, through the air as sound, to meet the canals of the ear, the pathways of hair and of fluid inside Val's skull are moved in this process. And my voice is heard, in relation to the environmental affects of a specific time. In our studio process, writing is shared primarily through voice. Val listens to the vocalisations of words, and this is how the development of *The Little peeling Cottage* progresses.

Sunday October 13

#1The heat of her face makes every
see through surface gauzy
sprinkler half working
a typewriter writing
as wonkily as upside
down ribbons of chocolate

#2The elbows clasp
A link in a necklace
The centre is tipped

Hourglass turning and streams of
Silver dust falling as
Stars do, the softness of tall
Thinking, grip the lino roof and
Pivot, arm of a clock,
Towards an ending

For somatic practitioner and choreographer Eva Karczag, speech is an integral part of the kinesthetic exchange between her and the dancers she works with. Like Minnick and Irigaray, Karczag (1996, p. 14) considers her words as modalities of touch; 'My words are...constant touches that keep shifting your attention into new places so you're constantly engaged, you're constantly being stimulated.' *The Little peeling Cottage* drew upon both spoken and written modes of language, although the writing itself was very much a paper bound practice, with the physical practice of drawing the letters, and the flow of shapes to form handwriting inextricable from my sense of choreographic writing. This practice is one of tuning my senses so that my kinaesthetic attention concentrates on our danced duet, and writing is one of the ways that this attention manifests; an offshoot of the process. At the same time the malleability and improvisatory nature of the speech pervades the shapes of letters, and the letters make 'documentation' offshoots that are navigation points as the structure of our work develops. These text-skins are integral in creating lines of communication and keeping the specificity and cadence of the work in line and in tune over multiple times, spaces, and even seasons. Like the moving/speaking/writing work of Simone Forti (2003), the written element of *The Little peeling Cottage* invites in disruptive slipperiness of speech and movement. At the same time this writing feeds the performance over time because we can refer to our performance writing at any given point in our process; the written texts are touch pads for memory. A few words will flood a present rehearsal with the tone of work from weeks past. *Camper* is rehearsed through autumn and into winter, and performed in spring.

The theory of constructed memory says that memory isn't necessarily fixed at the time of an experience. It is a creative and dynamic process in which the recollection of past events is a condition of present circumstances; where you are and what you are doing when you remember. It is the generation of a new memory each time something is recalled.

(deLahunta & Shaw, 2006, p. 62)

Each time we re-enter *The Little peeling Cottage* the work is re-imagined. I pick up the 'skin' generated in the last incarnation of our work, and we open and enter it through spoken reading, through attentive listening, then through performed movement and attentive writing. This work is constantly re-entered and renewed in each rehearsal and performance. Like memory it lives in a time zone of its own, its minutes stitched together by dance process, translated into the present. As Michael de Certeau (1984, p. 88) puts it; memory 'responds more than it records.'

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (2000, p. 397) discussion of translation as 'the simple miming of the responsibility to the trace of the other in the self' echoes my experience of watching movement and writing. The pores of my skin open

to the tone of Val's movement; tones and qualities layer upon the other and without knowing how, the words scribing paper link to this dance I'm following. I'm miming the act of writing with the hope that the dance will write for me. My job is to attend and to listen, to listen through muscles, nervous system, through each sensory pathway.

How does the translator attend to the specificity of the language she translates? ...we are talking of risks, of violence to the translating medium.
(Spivak, 2000, p. 398)

Indeed, there is a risk of violence to dancing whenever it is linked to writing, that the ephemeral live elements of movement will be subsumed by the historicising tendencies of words. It is this potential violence, which theorists such as Peggy Phelan (1993) and Andre Lepecki (2004) were so wary of, as to dismiss documentation from the ontology of performance altogether. In contrast, in creating *The Little peeling Cottage*, dancing, writing and speaking are a key means through which performance concepts are grown, and thus to attempt to disown written documentation from what defines these performances would be to disallow crucial means of creative invention. In a recent lecture Carol Brown (2007) spoke of the practice of choreography as 'the creation of a site of emergence'. Isn't this also what reading is? And what the writer hopes for as she works? Irigaray discusses the potential for speech to be a continuous site of opening into language and exchange. If much writing tends to fix and limit meaning, the embodiment of speech and the indeterminate, improvisatory nature of exchange and tonal shift open up the emergent, transitional nature of spoken language.

After practising *The Little peeling Cottage* score over thirty times in rehearsal and performance, my attention turned to how I might extend the performance of this work through the performance of the writing and how the transitional, emergent, tonal quality of our dance research might inform the interaction between texts and readers. Two particular areas of practice led research offered pathways into approaches to writing and into the organisation of pages, which allow for instability, transition, play and movement: the fields of performance writing and of artist books. Ric Allsopp (2004, p.5) discusses the field of performance writing:

The proliferation of pageworks as sites of performance which demand an interactive or reciprocal engagement, as a site of writing/inscription as performance, rather than *for* performance, suggest that the page is as much of an 'open field' as the shift from traditional spaces (in theatre, dance, fine art performance) has meant a repositioning of what constitutes the frame, context and content of the artwork.

Inherent in any reference to the book is a reference to actions of transfer and transaction implicit in the act of reading. The potential for disrupting expectations of passive readers and singular textual meanings permeates the fields of performance writing and artist books. The concept of the artists' book as a recognised medium of art practice proliferated in the 1960s. Joan Lyons (1985, p. 7) connects the development of this art form to 'the prevailing climate of social and political activism...and the new emphasis on art

process...artists were finding that books could *be* artworks in themselves.' The definition of what constitutes an artists' book has remained deliberately open, as new practices in book arts constantly defy and extend formal limitations. In Lyons' introduction to her book, *Artists' Books, A Critical Anthology and Sourcebook*, she emphasises the connection artists' books make with art process:

Words, images, colors, marks, and silences become plastic organisms that play across the pages in variable linear sequence. Their importance lies in the formulation of a new perceptual literature whose content alters the concept of authorship and challenges the reader to a new discourse with the printed page.

(Lyons, 1985, p. 7)

I took each page of writing created through the rehearsals and performances of *The Little peeling Cottage* and experimented with methods of editing, layout, font choice and binding that connected to the logic of our dance practice, and eventually chose to extend the site-specific nature of our performance into a series of site-specific artists' books. In the tradition of artists' books, it is common practice to reuse an existing book form as part of the creation of a work's specific logic. As Cole (2008, p. 5) suggests:

Altered books use an existing book and change its form or content to create a new work. Often the original book informs the content of the new. Sometimes part of the book is used to contribute its accepted meaning in a new context.

This trajectory of practice is exemplified in the work of artist Ann Hamilton, who has produced a range of altered book-works through her career. Each of these has taken a specific body of books, and repeated a very specific series of actions to intervene into the work of what a book might do. Disrupting and complicating perceptions of what it means to engage with the work of a book,

each book serves practically and conceptually as an overall 'corpus' – a body of information, a given container or figure – that is used in its entirety just as she also addresses the body and its sheltering clothing and architecture.

(Simon, 2006, p. 3).

The books in which I eventually installed *The Little peeling Cottage* performance writing were old 1960s geography books, which I chose for their age and the font of the pages, their connection with land-based research, their presentation of a past generation of thinking about the earth. The choreographic writing then performed a collaboration with the books I used, just as site specific performances are often made in response to a particular location. In this way the logic of our dance research (site specific, emergent and interactive) led to the choices I made in extending the dance into interactions with audiences who experience an element of our dance thinking through their engagement with the pages of *The Little peeling Cottage* artist book.

Writing as a choreographic mode is a form of performance practice that aims to feed the invention and development of dance ideas at the site where they

emerge via co-extensive practices of translation and duet (or trio, or quartet...) practice. My aim with this research is to present a dance based methodology for 'expressing the metamorphoses of forms into new bodies' (Picasso, in Gallery of Modern Art, 2008). Choreographic writing emerges out of dance practice, rather than attempting to dominate, preserve or represent it. It attempts to open out possibilities for dance ideas to form unpredictable openings across disciplines and spaces.

Acknowledgements

This research project is indebted to the contributions of Valerie Smith; Elizabeth Dempster at Victoria University, Melbourne and to Dance Studies, National Institute of Creative Arts and Industries, The University of Auckland.

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Biographical statement

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