

## CHAPTER FIFTEEN

# WHAT WOULD IT BE, IF IT DIDN'T HAVE TO BE LIKE THAT? UNDISCIPLINING THE TRAVEL OF DANCE IDEAS IN THE NEO-LIBERAL UNIVERSITY

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This is a stumble about how dance practices might unravel academic conventions, conventional habits of thinking, research, conventional modes for the movement of ideas. This is a slight unpicking at the level of pages. We are interested in inclusion, exclusion, feeling, space.

We are Jenny Roche and Alys Longley – both artist-academics, working in Brisbane, Australia and Auckland, New Zealand respectively. This is a chapter about the travel of dance ideas, and about a friendship as it develops through us meeting at different events – sharing our experiences working in increasingly neo-liberal university settings.

We are interested in placing detailed care in the gravity of each movement  
in this practice of dance writing

as we stumble with you as you make these pages alive by reading them

We are stumbling laterally, moved by the organisation of cells, sometimes it is the space moving us, sometimes our intentions move us into spaces. These pages have their own architecture and unfold a haptic organisation. We are interested in compositional/ affective provocations in a book about undisciplining dancing. We are interested in generative tensions and contradictory approaches.

We are interested in making lists of tasks we all could work through, regardless of time or setting, where the book forms the central axis of a shared kind of body, a body made of words and dances and practices merging imagination and embodiment in space and time. In prioritising

- lateral thinking
- play
- embodied or cellular knowledge
- spatial modes of composition
- visual modes of composition
- affective rather than explanatory registers of sense.

So we are thinking of opening space to stumble through expected academic structures for collaborating, sharing knowledge, and defining research – we are breathing together and wondering if working with somatic, improvisational and choreographic thinking could gently trample some academic conventions or boundaries. This stumble reflects on processes of conditioning toward success in the university system and asks, “What happens when we don’t behave? What happens when we find integrity in resisting the tropes of institutional properness? What is radical in this context?”

Task: Place your hand on the gate between binary ideas and sense into your imagination. Feel connectivity emerge and the gate fall away. That’s how it is with abstract things.

### **Three Beginnings**

The first exchange that initiated this writing was an event at the Dance and Somatic Practices Conference that was “envisioned as an unfinished encounter that arises in dialogue between participants, proposals and the wider context.”<sup>1</sup> We were invited by dancers/researchers Emma Meehan and Paula Kramer to co-facilitate a conference session in which the core material of the session was sharing between, where the fissure between organisers and participants could dissolve, in a logic of fluids rather than

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<sup>1</sup> *Open Dialogues* - remixed, unfinished, begun. A forum for early to mid-career researchers and artists, *Dance and Somatic Practices Conference, July 9-12, 2015 (Coventry, UK)*.

fixture. Our session combined talking, dancing, bodywork, sharing food and heartfelt discussion. In our second exchange, for the Undisciplining Dance Symposium we developed this structure in a session we titled Undisciplining the Conference in which there was time given for resting, connecting, bodywork, discussion of research, eating, improvising, writing and feedback. The third event informing this stumble was a three-day choreographic research workshop which we titled Undisciplining It All. This involved leading interdisciplinary laboratories for practice-led researchers and students at QUT in Brisbane, and Alys and Jenny working in the studio together on methods of dancing/writing. Through this studio work we developed a body of writing and movement scores.

## **1. Dance and Somatic Practices Conference: Coventry University. July, 2015**

Touch is food for the nervous system.

Jenny:

Alys and I simultaneously/spontaneously interviewed each other and committed to a contact improvisation duet as part of a 'presentation' at the Dance and Somatic Practices Conference. I still carry the feeling of weight, touch and resistance afforded by her physical presence while we discussed our experiences of working within our respective universities. The clarity of the physical boundary offered by Alys was a kind of meeting that rarely happens in a conference setting; something real in the midst of all this abstraction. It's easy to understand why this encounter might be so significant for us. It offers the possibility for an exchange of ideas alongside a meeting of matter, so that we might communicate in a wholly different way, led by both kinaesthetic momentum pathways and haptic modes of discovery, and by a conversation about developing our practices as artist/academics. What did our bodies speak of in that exchange? They revealed themselves as generators of ideas. They took risks, solved complex problems in balancing, explored new ledges and tipping points, finding moments of comfort and moments of strain.

Alys:

I also remember from the Coventry Conference the level of care and imagination Paula Kramer and Emma Meehan gave to practices of sharing and exchange. They went op-shopping and found glasses in sets of

two – as people entered the room they were given a glass, and then the person with a matching glass became their partner for conversation. This enabled chance encounters beyond small-talk. We also found food and drink that matched by colour – red, green, brown. So we'd offer strawberries, cherries and berry juice for red; spirulina, green apples and beans for green, then chocolate, raisins, chocolate milk for brown. This attention to the affective, design-orientated elements of exchange made a little space, set a tone for whimsical thinking and demonstrated a kind of imagination and play that often gets lost in institutional events. We emulated this structure for the Auckland conference. The wasabi peas were a hit.

## **2. Undisciplining Dance Conference: University of Auckland. July, 2016.**

A year on after our Coventry presentation, we are thinking seriously about what it means to undiscipline. The conference occurs just days after the Brexit vote in the UK. Austerity measures internationally are resulting in extreme cuts to arts funding. Universities are being required to economically rationalise all courses.

As academics we are being increasingly coerced into a speedy productivity that does not allow for the steadier, less goal oriented and more attentive pace of studio praxis. Being more aware of embodiment causes us to slow down, engage political dimension of slowing and listening. Slowing down runs counter to the working environment of most academics, even those who work within a creative arts context. Berg and Seeber's inspirational examination of the implications of the corporatization of the university system expound an alignment with the 'Slow' movement as a means of resisting the ethos driving the speedy operations of academia.<sup>2</sup> They describe the 'fragmentation' that many academics experience due to 'increasing workloads, the sped-up pace, and the instrumentalism that pervades the corporate university', where time is subdivided, tightly apportioned and monetized as a limited resource. Furthermore, theatre scholar Adam Alston identifies the anxiety academics experience due to quotas for publication and annual performance

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<sup>2</sup> Maggie Berg and Barbara K. Seeber, *The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy* (Toronto; Buffalo; London: University of Toronto Press, 2016), 25.

assessments as a kind of 'emotional/affective labour' that serves the neoliberal agenda.<sup>3</sup> This anxiety is acceptable to universities because of the productivity it engenders, even when there is a significant cost to staff wellbeing.

We want to develop a mode of conference presentation that enables connecting with sensation, tracking our responses to an environment, moving outside of structured time and bending the rules. At the back of our minds is the inverse question – what is lost if we don't make time for these practices?<sup>4</sup> In her treatise on relationships between biosemiotics, creativity and innovation, Wendy Wheeler explains how 'creativity doesn't seem to come to us via consciousness and memory alone'. Bending or breaking the rules of a particular idiom or field of enquiry and 'attending to' the less obvious signs that may appear alongside established paradigms are formative in the development of insight.<sup>5</sup>

After training and working within a particular field we develop skill sets and knowledge that inform our ability to tackle new situations. However, if this becomes too tightly configured we can become enamoured by technical prowess and the 'dominant rules of the field' rather than open to new directions and innovations.<sup>6</sup> Unfocused time is an important aspect of this creative process – perhaps daydreaming when you should be writing your journal article. Wheeler explains that the poet John Keats described this as 'diligent indolence', that is, waiting for the moment of inspiration while attending to the surrounding signs whether seemingly significant or not.<sup>7</sup>

Wheeler's work evokes questions regarding supervising postgraduate students, finding a balance between the idiosyncratic creative process of a student and our existing knowledge of academic conventions, university regulations, timelines and the limitations of practice-led research. Turnaround times for PhDs have become so tight that ideas need to be compartmentalised and defined from very early on in the process.

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<sup>3</sup> Adam Alston, *Beyond Immersive Theatre* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 66.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, 147.

<sup>5</sup> Wendy Wheeler, *The Whole Creature: Complexity, Biosemiotics and the Evolution of Culture* (London: Lawrence and Wishart, 2006), 146.

<sup>6</sup> *Ibid.*, 140.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 146.

While this has brought more focus to the area of practice led research, it can seduce us into formulaic approaches through which we ‘package’ our ideas rather than expand our frames of reference.

We are feeling the need to question relationships between control and freedom, between fluidity and rigidity, between encouraging thinking that moves in a linear task-based way, and thinking that moves with peripheral vision, associative rather than direct, unexpected rather than pre-supposed, intuitive rather than predictable.

As supervisors we have to give direction while being responsive to the creative ebbs and flows of the student. Are we still able to realise what it is like for students coming in to the academy from the field of creative practice? Can we remember the intense destabilisation that comes of learning a new language? We think of how supervision meetings so often occur in offices rather than dance studios, which is doubly deskilling.

Could collegiality act as a radical response to the institutionalizing processes of the contemporary university, as Berg and Seeber suggest?<sup>8</sup> This means valuing internal networks and support systems, resisting competition amongst colleagues. They explain, ‘talking with others made clear to us that many of us are searching for meaningful exchange about what it feels like to be an academic in the corporate university, and it drove home the fact that the corporate university actively militates against us having these exchanges.’<sup>9</sup> The most radical steps we can take in this current epoch may be to cultivate deeper human connections and possibilities for cooperation.

Our presentation at the Undisciplining Dance conference aimed to open up a space for such engagements and resulted in an exchange between dance researchers based in Hong Kong, Australia and New Zealand. We focussed on alternative paradigms of connection and interaction, valuing reciprocity, food, exchange, being together rather than working together, listening together, having smaller expectations based on dropping in to sensing and feeling as a community of practice. We wanted to explore the benefits of working small scale and placing empathy,

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<sup>8</sup> Maggie Berg and Barbara K. Seeber, *The Slow Professor: Challenging the Culture of Speed in the Academy* (Toronto; Buffalo; London: University of Toronto Press, 2016).

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 85.

compassion and wellbeing at the core of this opportunity to share ideas together. Our session involved 'dropping down' into the present moment, discussing the conference, sharing food in rounds of colour, drawing maps and then moving them in space, then writing again from the felt sense of embodiment. More food, more chatting, and moving/talking exchanges.

### **3. Queensland University of Technology, Australia**

Alys:

Jenny and I have vague ideas about a project together – we have made time in the studio to explore possibilities. We are particularly interested in choreographic scores and the fold between paper and space. We are exploring different writing/moving practices.

Jenny:

The encounter seems more important than what we might make, though anxieties about outcomes also arise. Creativity is rationalised against what it might produce of value – an idea, a piece, a publication, a shared grant application...there must be a return on the investment in creativity...but I'm really just relieved to be in a process again.

#### **Studio Writing: Alys – reflection on moving**

I remembered watching Gremlins on the plane to get here. The memory arrives against the smoothness of the cement. The wall acted as a device for time travel. The wall and the touch and the light – when forces align the imagination follows

When forces align the imagination follows and the leaves of language open, cells watered and exposed to light, reproducing, passing away. The residues left by touch, still palpable many turns later, after the flesh has shed and renewed

After the flesh has shed and renewed the structure same but different. There was shaking and then yielding there was the possibility of gravity's renewal – and this possibility was enacted. Rereading Don DeLillo's *White Noise* I went with great anticipation to the moment of

terrible disappointment. It is a brink where we hold each other tenderly, hopeful and optimistic for what seems like no good reason.

I think of how Mogwai is also a gremlin, and Stephen Spielberg and how walls are shaking and vibrating all the time at once and yielding and holding and the things we contain and the things we spill

a brink where we hold each other with optimism  
spilling all smooth and exposed and tremulous to time.

### **Jenny: Reflection on Moving**

Stiffness and tightness in my shoulder  
Right rightness (memories of another piece and a poem by Robert Lax)  
Always right. Strangeness, awkwardness.

Back to the alignment – no –  
maybe that's not the alignment, maybe that's the idea – what is alignment if it doesn't have to be anything? What might be the place, the foundation, what might it be if it didn't have to be like that? Still always back to that place, that parallel, what would it be if it didn't have to be that? Like a vice, I see my grandfather's workshop. Hold the wood in place, tighten it up, and then it's locked. What could it be if it didn't have to be that? Every day, every class, checking in to that place, that point of reference. What's checking in? Checking in to the moment. What's in the moment? It's just one part.

Lots of different parts, fragments, like they're all moving in their own way on their own path on their own cycle not part of the whole, some lag behind the others some don't complete the perfect cycle some have broken, some have, not stuck, but stiff.

Vibration forward and back has different affects, different manifestations and different places. Different pauses, different weight, different time frame.

I don't know what it is. It's like it's not coming freer by moving. It's enjoying its constraint, it's completely its own limitation. It doesn't want to resolve anything or make anything better. It doesn't want to have a revelation about itself it's stiff and stuck and doesn't wanna flow, and it doesn't even wanna have a break in rhythm. It doesn't wanna be



organised, it doesn't wanna be comfortable. It's a space within restriction. It's a possibility within restriction. It's a restriction that doesn't have to come free. It doesn't have to change, it doesn't have to mend its ways, It doesn't have to transform It doesn't have to become beautiful It doesn't have to be inspiring It doesn't have to give insight, it doesn't have to shift levels it can just be.

Back and forth.

It doesn't want to be anything good.  
Different Ways a Meeting Can Happen

We are thinking again of our priorities list from earlier in this stumble,

- lateral thinking
- play
- embodied or cellular knowledge
- spatial modes of composition
- visual modes of composition
- affective rather than explanatory registers of sense

We are thinking of how touch is food for the nervous system, of the different ways a meeting can happen. We are reflecting on the time of the university and the time of moving together without words, about how for us, moving together, connecting through touch, making space for a listening and tuning has its own diligence and its own precariousness. We are sensing into risk, the intimacy of channelling gravity, the vulnerability of improvisation. Of the slow time of making a movement score together.

These are the vital skills we need to counter the speed, the shortening of our stories, the strain.

We listen in to the poetics of gravity

together.

There is a weight and a counter weight.

There is an attempt to make space in how we share the discipline of dance, there is a hand resting on the boundaries between disciplines, listening in.

There is your hand navigating this page, and our hands guiding the  
impressions of shapes in patterns and tides of thinking. We are making  
something together. In all our years of dancing

being present.  
we have refined and refined the practice of

It is what we offer as we stumble, together, into

inclusion

exclusion  
space

feeling

### **Bibliography**

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