

1-1-2001

Accumulated response in live improvised dance performance

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ACCUMULATED RESPONSE

IN

LIVE IMPROVISED DANCE PERFORMANCE

By

Joanna Tollemache Pollitt, BA.

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfilment of
the Requirements for the Award of
Master of Arts (Creative Arts)
at the Faculty of the
Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts,
Edith Cowan University.

Date of submission: December 12, 2001

USE OF THESIS

The Use of Thesis statement is not included in this version of the thesis.

ABSTRACT

The *response* project and accompanying thesis aim to affirm the role of the dancer as an authority in revealing patterns and traces of accumulated lived experience, knowledge and ideas through the practice and performance of dance improvisation. The dancing body is investigated as a dynamical and complex system of research that is embedded in a process of continual response to the present. These bodily inscriptions and the process of active response form the seminal grounds for the physical and energetic exchange of improvised dance in performance.

Dance improvisation is inextricably linked with the dancer and as such the practitioner bears within their work as many contradictions as has any individual dance artist. An examination of the lineage of dance improvisation that has its roots in postmodern dance reveals a paradoxical practice of maintaining a continuous present while drawing on an accumulative past. Simultaneously in process and in performance the dancer is in a permanent state of response - to the process itself, to the environment and to humanness. A highly rigorous and complex creative practice, improvisation in contemporary dance is grounded in the embodied knowledge of the dancer. What then is the value of a dancer's accumulated experience in a culture that embraces and promotes new technology-based work?

It can be said that no dance performance whether choreographed or improvised can ever guarantee sameness because it occurs in a state of 'aliveness'. Improvisation most closely alludes to this 'aliveness' as it is intrinsically unstable and unrepeatable. With its documentation stored in the body, improvisation leaves even *less* hard copy historical evidence than the already ephemeral nature of choreographed dance work. Dance improvisation, like all dance is not a fixed medium and I assert that it can never be exactly reproduced by film, video, computer capture, notation or even memory. These recording/recalling mechanisms capture parts of the dance but they all taint the experience with their own subjectivity and limitations. I aim to support that this physical documentation of improvisation, though not a reliable, tangible or testable record of the event, is real and can be revealed in the improvising dancer.

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The work aims to relocate and present dance improvisation as personal, articulate and relevant contemporary arts practice that can offer a precise and non-linear insight into the performer. In response to the glut of video-based, multi-media and new technology inspired work, dance improvisation brings the dance back to the dancer and predicts a trend of interest back to the live body. Humans are complex and it is this complexity that I hope to reveal through dance improvisation, in the choices, potential and responses of the performers.

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Signed :



Date:27.3.02.....

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to express my sincere thanks to my Supervisor, Dr Maggi Phillips, for her detailed and insightful assistance in the preparation of this thesis.

Special thanks also to my husband, Franc Raschella, for his ongoing support and valuable assistance in the preparation of the video as well as to Jennifer Monson, Amanda Jones, Lindon Thompson, Nanette Hassall, Reyes de Lara, Cath Stewart and Rod & Dee Pollitt.

*I would especially like to thank all of the dancers and musicians, who participated in the **response** project, particularly, Bec Reid, Katie Moore, Angie Diaz & Phoebe Robinson.*

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INTRODUCTION

Dance improvisation is a genre that is “alive to, aware of and interested in: responsive to” (NOD, p43), the ‘live’ aspect of performance and the ‘aliveness’ of the performer. With this as the underlining premise of my research, I have journeyed through varied avenues of response, including both an attempt at: “ a verbal or written answer”, which partly forms this thesis and “an excitation of a nerve impulse caused by a change or event; a physical reaction to a specific stimulus or situation” (Ibid, p1581) which is variously embodied in the *response* project. In both responses, I limit my study to dance improvisation as a form of performance in the context of professional contemporary dance practice.

It is necessary to acknowledge that this exegesis was undertaken in direct relationship to my practical research in-body and in the studio. It is not meant to be an un-earthing or compilation of artists practicing in this area, rather it is a personal foray into a form that has myriad entry points and as such I have been specific in citing only those references that have directly affected my own work. That said, a volume of research was excluded from this particular document due to the specific limitations and word restrictions of a Masters study. As an Australian dance artist living in Perth, I feel it is necessary to acknowledge the ongoing tradition of improvisation in Melbourne supported by artists and publications such as Al Wunder, Trotman and Morrish, State of Flux, Born in a Taxi, Ros Warby, *Writings On Dance* and *Proximity* that continue to challenge improvisation as a performance form.

Dance improvisation is a decidedly ephemeral art form yet the experience of it remains present in the body. Though difficult to measure, the memory, awareness and resonance of lived experience remain as traces in the body, which, I believe, become evident in the moment of performance. This ‘aliveness’ in dance improvisation is attained, not only through attention to the present, but through attention to accumulated layers of prior lived experience. These accumulated layers allow a non-linear, and according to Kaye, a thoroughly postmodern insight into the performer and the performance as “a giving over of the modernist concern for singularity, depth and the stability of meaning to a free play of signifiers, to

exhibitions of fragmentation and multiplicity, where meaning is shifting and undecidable” (Kaye, p17).

I would argue that this state of aliveness as developed through improvisational practice provides an ever expanding and pliant structure in which experience is accumulated. One speaks of ‘selective memory’ – but what or where is it that one selects from? Muscle memory too is a form of storing and retrieving accumulated experience. I believe that experiences and events rest in the skin, in the musculature and in the body’s subconscious groundings that continuously affect our responses to any one moment. Through the *response* project I ask if it is possible to dance in the present with an impressed physicality of lived experience weighting one’s improvisational choices and responses to a live moment in performance.

Inherently reflexive in terms of the performer and the performance, dance improvisation values the dancer as an authority in revealing traces of human experience. The performer responds from the frame of reference of lived experience, and it is this *awareness* that allows an insight into the experience. Not surprisingly it is difficult to structure such an investigation in that the nature of the material and of accumulated experience is non linear or easily accessible in a scientific-framed discussion. Imagination and an individual response to the present is a fractured expanse of space that is difficult to define. It cannot be neatly tied up or be conclusive. The evidence is in the doing and in the watching. It is live. The phenomenon of dance improvisation however can be discussed and debated within the context of contemporary dance performance and I will attempt to do justice to this history and add my own accumulated experience through my dancing body, and my thoughts, imaginings and musings.

Looking at a ten year time frame in which I have been developing as a performer and choreographer, a number of artists and experiences have influenced the research I am now undertaking. My own lineage owes much to the inspired dance artists I have worked with and observed, particularly Jennifer Monson, Rosalind Crisp, Karen Pearlman, Richard James Allen and Wendy McPhee. After leaving Tasdance in 1997, I began to focus on developing a personal dance practice, which since early

1999, has seen me turn my attention back to the body as a locus for experiencing dance after working on numerous collaborative multi-media projects. The purpose of my investigation into dance improvisation as a performance practice has resulted not so much from a need to intellectualize dance or question ‘why dance’ but to connect dance with the self as it relates to experience. What are the points that connect dance to experience, to the wider debates about art and the world? I am interested in living in the world and in the world that lives within me. Through this research I hope to reveal parts of that world and experience myself in it.

The development of the *response* project has occurred in parallel with my theoretical research and inevitably, each form has informed the other often in surprising and unpredictable ways. Both, the discussion in Part One, and the *response* project described in Part Two and the accompanying video documentation, have been a process of continual discovery and rediscovery.

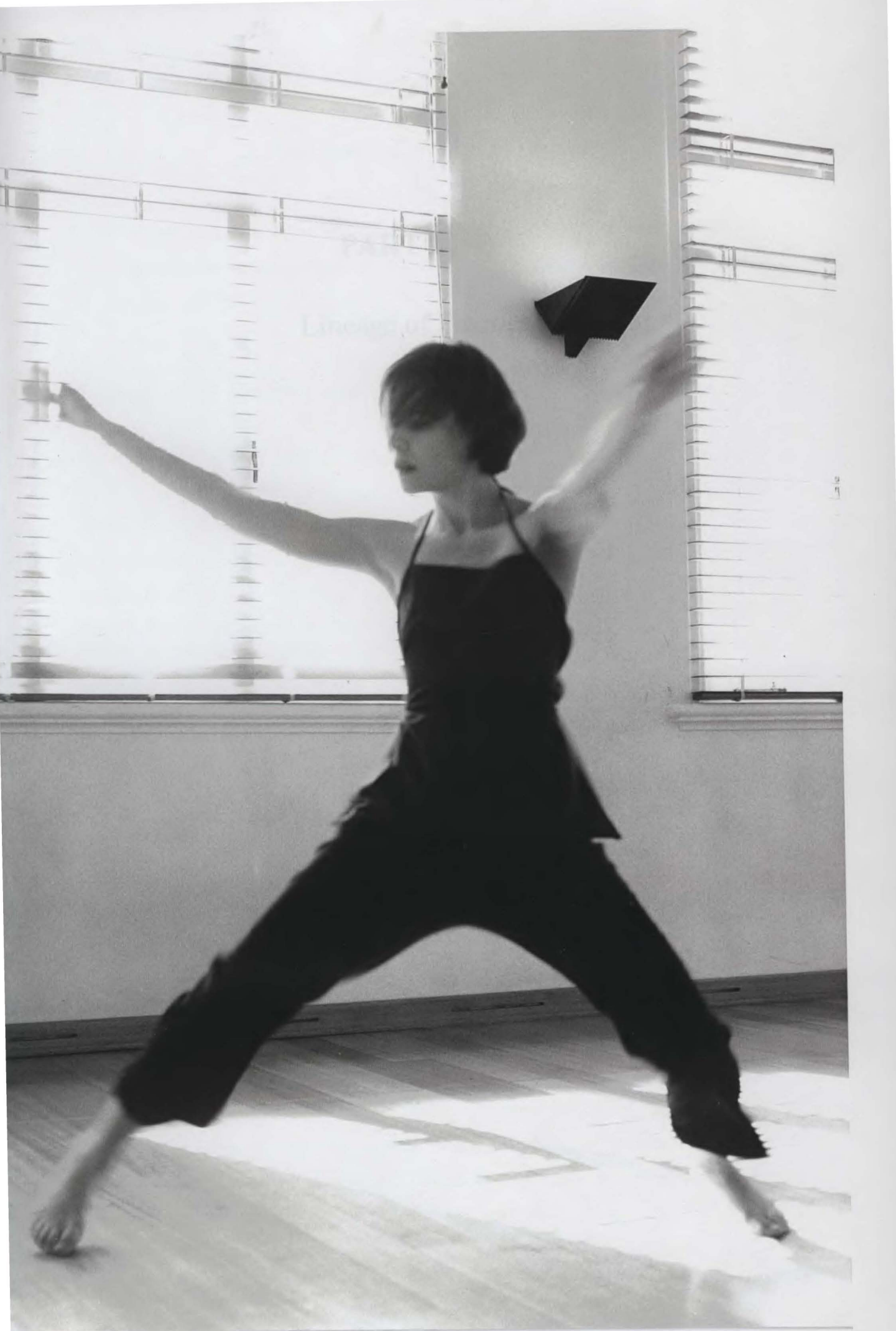
In Part One, I trace the lineage of dance improvisation in relation to the broader context of modern and postmodern dance and the evolving definitions associated with each of these practices. Improvisation is not solely the domain of contemporary dance, the technique is widely used across many forms and in other art forms such as jazz music. In terms of this investigation, however, I focus on its application within contemporary dance by professional performers. This lineage of practice directly feeds into my assertion that improvisation is accumulative, that dance is passed from person to person and, in the right circumstances, the experience of another will effect your own. As Martha Graham elucidates:

For all of us, but particularly for a dancer with his intensification of life and his body, there is a blood memory that can speak to us. Each of us from our mother and father has received their blood and through their parents and their parents' parents and backward into time. We carry thousands of years of that blood and its memory (Graham in Carter, 1998, p69).

Within this lineage, hierarchies and structures are exposed and discussed with the view to challenging commonly held perceptions about improvised performance.

Focusing specifically on the processes inherent within the practice of improvised dance, I go on to discuss particular approaches of several seminal artists to cultivating presence in the moment of live performance. Examining the nature of 'live' performing bodies in relation to today's climate of rapid technological interface, I ask 'where is the dance?' and debate the issues surrounding technology's potential for long life performance versus the instantaneous life of the dance. In this discussion I also address the question of dance as a commodity through the controlling functions of technology and the resulting devaluing of an unstable dancing body in such a climate. The ideas explored in Part One attempt to relocate dance improvisation in the culture of the twenty first century as a relevant and highly watchable form of performance that is experiencing a resurgence in practice.

Part Two describes the development of the *response* project from March 2000 to May 2001 and is accompanied by a video documenting the same period. Examining dance improvisation as research in practice, the *response* project looks to the lived body as a site of renewed investigation and a complex "new media" in itself. The *response* project maintains the dancing body as its point of focus in investigating the potential energy that is apparent in the responses, interactions and decisions of a live improvising performer. In order to move into the unknown through improvisation I believe you need to be aware of what 'is' known and thus I am working with trained dancers in order to begin with a shared language base for dance improvisation to be 'discussed/danced'. Dancers are privy to a wealth of information about the physical being and bring this attention to the world in which they live. They are trained in developing the pathways of the body and they work with the muscles and the imagination of the body/mind. The *response* project aims to bring the dancing body and its inner complexity back into the performance in a way that both references and transcends the improvised experiments grounded in the 1960s and 70s.



PART ONE

Lineage of Practice

CHAPTER 1: Lineage of Practice

Lived bodies strain at the seams of a culture's ideological fabric. Inherently unstable, the body is always in a process of becoming – and becoming undone (Albright, p5).

Becoming - and becoming undone

Describing dance improvisation through the choreography of words is a necessary paradox. If we take Derrida's explanation of language as an endlessly unraveling 'chain of signifiers' we will come closest to defining the physical experience of dance improvisation itself. In watching dance improvisation, one is reading a language that reveals itself through a physical 'chain of signifiers' with meanings layered and interpreted by the viewer's own set of experiences and values.

The "core sense" of the word *improvise* according to the New Oxford Dictionary of English is to "create and perform spontaneously or without preparation" (p920). The "sub sense" is to "produce or make (something) from whatever is available". These 'sense' definitions carry connotations of 'making do' that have continuously dogged the practice of dance improvisation as being not 'real' or 'serious' dancing. Language, like the body, is in a continual state of 'becoming and becoming undone' by change, association and application. Thus the practice of dance improvisation has many definitions and interpretations relative to time, place and situation. Dana Reitz says of improvisation that the word "doesn't indicate necessarily the work that's involved...it might take me two years to develop a structure, so then to call it improv feels like I've just done it that day" (Reitz in Dempster, 1991, p34). Many artists have attempted to reclaim their work from the myriad associations by renaming or redefining their pursuit; Anna Halprin changed 'improvisation' to 'exploration' for similar reasons that Deborah Hay prefers 'exercise' to the term 'practice'. However, both remain burdened with words that lead to other words in an attempt to describe what is not written but danced.

I will attempt to reveal dance improvisation as a specific dance form that requires rigorous *preparation* through practice and demands a thorough knowledge of its subject in order to be 'spontaneous'. Dance improvisation is practiced not *despite* formal dance techniques but is in fact layered and embodied with and within them. "One does not dissolve a bodily history merely by willing it away" (Rothfield, p3). Dance improvisation as I practice it does not seek to avoid or escape previous experience but embodies historical evidence and memory in a non-linear evocation of the present. Dance improvisation takes the dancer, the 'lived body' as its point of interest and therefore can be as varied and unpredictable as any dance artist and just as difficult to define in terms of a collective ideology. The relationships and energy between improvising performers generates a heightened state of awareness that is much fueled by a physicalised version of Derrida's unpredictable chains of signifiers.

With its roots most commonly aligned with the investigations of postmodern practitioners in the 1960s, dance improvisation is specific to forms of contemporary dance that draw from training methods and techniques formulated in the modern dance era of the first half of the twentieth century in America and Europe. Thus dance improvisation also comes encumbered with the minefield of associations, connotations and various practices of modern and postmodern dance.

I will attempt to describe these evolving practices of dance improvisation within the broader context of American modern and postmodern dance practices in order to establish a context for current contemporary practice, including my own. If my understanding of dance improvisation concentrates on locating access points to accumulated experience and imagination in live performance then the accumulation and lineage of this practice is vital to my argument.

Dance improvisation; unbalancing the border between modern and postmodern dance practice.

Dance improvisation, as it relates specifically to this study, has strong ties to the American experience of the twentieth century art of the avant-garde. Avant-garde practice crosses both modern and postmodern dance and can provide evidence to

highlight the shifting definitions of dance improvisation. The purpose of this study is not to re-enter the modern/postmodern dance debate, but its inclusion is necessary in establishing the complexity of dance improvisation and its relationship to contemporary dance practice.

Avant-garde, in its literal meaning according to Jurgen Habermas, has parallels to improvised performance, in that it is understood as “invading unknown territory ... conquering an as yet unoccupied future” (Habermas, p5). Early modern dance was synonymous with the avant-garde as it rebelled against the model of the romantic ballet when Isadora Duncan first “removed story from the dance altogether and insisted that dance could be an emanation of the soul and emotion” (Humphrey, 1959, p15). The artists that followed this precedent and moved through new territory became the establishment in dance. These artists offered turning points and developments in dance from the turn of the twentieth century when as Humphrey recalled, “Suddenly the dance, the Sleeping Beauty, so long reclining in her dainty bed, had risen up with a devouring desire” (Ibid, p16).

‘Modern’ dance was sympathetic to the progress championed by modernity and thrived in the period of high modernity from the turn of the century to the early 1960s, in parallel with an avant-garde impetus in the arts. At the same time, variance in the terms ‘modern’, ‘modernity’, and ‘modernism’ as they apply to dance are contentious. According to Roger Copeland, the dance revolution pioneered by the early ‘moderns’ defined itself in opposition to the “vulgar-virtuosity-for-its-own-sake” ballet establishment and “consisted in a large part of establishing new representational connections between movement and lived experience” (Copeland, p4). The ‘modern’ choreographers, including such influential artists as Martha Graham and Doris Humphrey, were supported by dance critic, John Martin, who represented them as “courageous pioneers and as symbols of American modernity” thus “creating a bridge between an uninitiated audience and the avant-garde dance of that period” (Dempster, 1989, p40). For Americans, “modernity was the area in which they were in advance of Europe. Understandably, therefore, they perceived it in isolationist, nationalist terms and saw it as the means to realizing the American Dream” (Burt, p134). Graham in particular was attracted to the utopian promise of

modernity and portrayed the American experience through expressionistic explorations of freedom and progress. At this point it must be noted that the precursors to this period of American modern dance can be found in Germany with Mary Wigman, who as a student of Rudolf Laban, created a style which, by means of personally conceived movement, aimed to increase emotional expression and therefore the relevance of dance. However, the project of modernity in America thrived on isolationist strategies and the connection between European and American modern dance at this time, was played down by artists and commentators alike.

Though modern dance is not essentially modernist, the well-known American avant-garde dance artists of the 1950s and 1960s including George Balanchine and Merce Cunningham subscribed to a modernist approach to choreography in terms of structure and style. These choreographers investigated pure dance, focused on movement for movement's sake and broke away from what they thought was an over expression of emotive dramatic dance that began in the 1920s and came to the fore with the work of Graham. Resisting the 'modern' structure of 'story' or central theme in which dance, music and décor revolved, the elements of the collaboration were more likely to be independent and sympathetic to Clement Greenberg's belief that art was not obligated to represent anything but itself. Cunningham's chance-based explorations resulted in highly structured, partly improvised works and experiments, which heralded and preceded the work of the widely defined postmodern artists of the Judson era. With his use of blank faced, androgynous dancers, pared back from womanliness, Cunningham made Graham's emotional outpouring look almost old fashioned. Though not always driven by a narrative structure, the early moderns used abstraction as a way of revealing the 'inner landscape', emotion and themes, whereas the modernist approach was in Cunningham's terms, the fact of dancing itself. Categorizing dance artists is problematic as aspects of 'modern' and 'modernist' dance can be identified in both ideologies. Graham, contrary to historical summations of her work as being a vehicle to express something else, also "posited dance as an autonomous form of knowledge" (Franko, p38). Primarily, it was their respective departures from the establishment preceding them that deemed the work to be avant-garde.

So, although the dance was clearly now liberated from the ‘drowning swans’ of the ballet, the form suffered from its own stereotyping and a confused wide-ranging usage of the term ‘modern dance’. As Shelly Lassica points out “the history of dance or anything else does not progress simply from one stage to another” (Lassica, p24) *but*, the varying dance practices are often lumped together, encompassing a range of styles and eras that includes the pioneers Isadora Duncan, Loie Fuller and Ruth St Denis, the schools of Martha Graham, Hanya Holm, Charles Weidman and Doris Humphrey, the complexity of the social ‘revolutionary’ mass dance of the thirties, the work of Cunningham, Anna Halprin and Balanchine as well as the ‘post-modern’ choreographers including Yvonne Rainer, Trisha Brown, Steve Paxton, Deborah Hay, Twyla Tharp and many in between. The confusion was amplified in Australia where modern dance was thought to be *anything* that wasn’t ballet (including folk dance, tap, jazz and ballroom). Today, ‘modern’ dance as taught in Australian institutions has been more or less replaced with the term ‘contemporary’ which *indicates* an ever changing present, though in many cases the ‘modern’ version is still at the fore with Graham and Cunningham techniques often the staple of daily training practice. Russell Dumas, founder and director of Dance Exchange, argues that what Australia experienced as modern dance in the 60s and 70s was “just a recycled, recreative colonial practice” (Dumas, p34). He goes on to explain;

The Australian dancer, lacking direct access to and connection with the culture and heritage of ballet, cannot embody that heritage with authority, nor can he/she reflect the cultural understandings embedded in it. The dancer’s body bears no understanding of the present having been shaped by the past ... The general perception was that we could acquire modern dance, by learning Graham or Cunningham technique for instance, in much the same way as we had acquired ballet (Ibid, p30).

Conversely dance pioneer Margaret Lassica, actively involved in dance in Australia since the 1940s as the founder and director of the Melbourne Modern Dance Ensemble, argues,

A tradition of modern dance did exist but it had been ruptured, suppressed, and at times subjected to enormous hostility ... there was no record, no reflection upon, or analysis of modern dance in Australia. Australian dancers were growing up quite ignorant of the work that had preceded them ... access to this period was virtually closed (Lassica in Dempster, 1989, p33).

Libby Dempster explains “The issue of modern dance in Australia hinges upon questions of national identity and national self image, and upon historically determined patterns of political affiliation and social allegiance” (Dempster, 1989, p43). I suggest that both these accounts of our historical lineage have left imprints in the bodies and practices of Australian dancers.

In terms of dance improvisation, the information and physical resources of the practice lie in the energetic and constantly evolving exchange between past experience and the present. In 1939, Martin proposed that: “No movement of the human body is possible without definite relation to life experience, even if it is random or inadvertent” (Martin, p23). He goes on to describe the role of the spectator as one who responds to the dance with an associational relationship to their own background, demanding that they be active in forming a motor response to the dance in order for it to “function as an art of movement” (Ibid, p25). His vision of ‘active’ watching is somewhat dated in today’s more passive culture of processed and easily accessed ‘reality’ TV, but such a proactive stance pertains to the responsive, immediate audience exchange strived for in live improvisation. Suggesting that dance should only be drawn from a dancer’s “motor memory of emotion” (Ibid, p56), Martin’s early insight into modern dance somewhat paralleled Stanislavsky’s method acting of inner identification in that he looked upon movement as an art weighted with lived experience, though clearly he also advocated modernism’s attainment of ‘essence’ through abstraction.

Art is not, however, merely a means for reliving the past; its only relation to the past is to give it focus, drawing out of the haphazard miscellany which constitutes one’s background a clearly defined body of experiences, seen

now for the first time under the artist's stimulus, as belonging not to an isolated period gone by but as giving meaning to the present. Thus in the instant of revelation, past and present illuminate each other, and the process itself adds a still further immediate experience, a quickening synthesis which actual life environment at the moment could not provide alone (Martin, p4).

Modernism was able to reject and transcend the representational past because such a past was easily read and understood. Postmodernism, takes a different view in that it “self-consciously ‘replays’ images of a past that cannot be known, but that can only be constructed and reconstructed through a play of entirely contemporary references to the *idea* of the past” (Kaye, p20). In this way, postmodernism sees the author as perpetually bound to his/her work and the audience as an integration of performance. Kaye talks about performance as something that ‘happens’, an ‘event’ that marks it closest to the postmodern condition in “seeking always to postpone the possibility of the ‘modern’ and so its own final definition” (Ibid, p22). ‘Experience’ then is in a constant state of flux as information is accumulated and thought processes are affectively challenged, shifting in relationship to the ongoing present.

Dance improvisation fits within an avant-garde agenda that crosses modernism and postmodernism in that dance-making itself is ‘essentially’ a process of improvisation and this process is a project of continually beginning again. Improvisation can be aligned with both modernism’s now unfashionable project of revealing ‘essence’ through abstraction and Martin’s ‘motor memory’, as well as with Kaye’s postmodern revisiting of the past and ultimate delaying of finality or definition.

Avant-garde in dance can be distinguished as it distinctly challenged the status quo, occurring in waves in reaction to the established trends and preceding motivations. The avant-garde artists of modernity transgressed tradition: Graham was motivated from a feminist viewpoint of the emotional and personal while Cunningham, in turn, depersonalized his dancers, drawing on technical mastery to create a new movement vocabulary. The ‘postmodern’ choreographers that followed again provoked a radical change in response to the prevailing codified systems of modern dance. As Dempster concludes, “In asserting the materiality of the dancing body, it affirms the

specificity of each dancing presence, of each body's lived experience" (Dempster, 1988, p34). Yvonne Rainer reclaimed pedestrian movement as dance and famously said 'no' to traditional performance expectations that, according to her, included virtuosity, the star image, spectacle, seduction of the spectator and all other elements that took dancing away from the essentials of time, space and movement. Rainer's suggestion that "action can be best focused on through the submerging of the personality; so ideally one is not oneself, one is a neutral 'doer'" (Rainer, p65) is at odds with an improvisational philosophy which demands that the performer be 'personally' present. Sally Banes termed Rainer's manifesto a 'strategy of denial' (Banes, 1987, p43). "Because of its commitment to the democratic ethos, the art of the early sixties avant-garde circulated transgressive ideas in what would ultimately become acceptable packages. This contradiction heralded the end of the modernist avant-garde and the beginning of postmodernism" (Banes, 1993, p7).

According to Dempster "There is in postmodern dance no image of perfection or unity, no hierarchy and no failure" (Dempster, 1988, p22). I believe that dance is subject to hierarchies of practice and that 'no failure' implies no risk and, subsequently no development of practice. So if the term 'avant-garde' has become "simply a menu of options drained of the fervor of their original impulses" (Schechner, p311) and everything has become conceivable as dance practice; how then do we describe work that defies the establishment? Is the term avant-garde defunct in a current context because there is no such work, or because there is no social agenda to support it? There has been a backlash of sorts to Rainer's manifesto in that virtuosity is back, along with just about anything else. We now have a commodifiable institution of the 'cutting edge' espoused by the establishment and actively sought as a requirement by arts funding bodies. It is what contemporary theatregoers expect, it is the norm. "How is it possible to transgress when everything is permissible?" (Crouch, p9). Avant-garde practice cannot exist if it is *expected*.

But the art of the avant-garde is never 'complete'. Determined, as it is by the local and topical, the events of history itself, and by such things as the forms and operations of mechanical reproduction, from photography to television, that record this history, the art of the avant-garde is always in

process, always engaged. It is furthermore, purposefully undecidable. Its meanings are explosive, ricocheting and fragmenting throughout its audience. The work becomes a situation, full of suggestive potentialities, rather than a self-contained whole, determined and final (Sayre, p7).

If a feature of avant-garde practice is to transcend and challenge the establishment, then it can be aligned in some ways with feminist theory and practice. Modern and postmodern dance artists alike reclaimed the body as a valued site and rejected the notion of women as androgynous facilitators of a 'pure' male vision. Aligned with a period of women's liberation, the Judson group instigated a major shift for women in the arts who emerged to create, develop processes and perform as equals "not in a protofeminist separatist mode, but in concert with their male peers" (Lassica, p24). Dempster points out, that inextricably linked to dance, the body "not disciplined to the enunciation of a singular discourse, is a multivocal and potentially disruptive force which undermines the unity of phallogocentric discourse" (Dempster, 1988, p24). The emergence of critical theory surrounding the body and embodied knowledge, indicates the status of improvisation as a potential vehicle for the manifestation of these lived discourses.

The slippage of ideas and experience between these multiple discourses of dance artists and practices is central to my argument in advocating a lineage of practice. And it is this continuation of a cross-referencing, reactive and responsive dance that is central to the practice of dance improvisation. The agendas of the early moderns espousing a Nietzschean duality of Apollo and Dionysus described by Humphrey as the 'the arc between two deaths' applies to dance improvisation. The purity of Cunningham's dance experiments applies to dance improvisation. The postmodern assumption of form, function and 'doing' applies to dance improvisation. The project of 'paring back' in modernism can be applied to dance improvisation in that the art of dance is at the fore, relying on the form itself to both stimulate and function as performance and process. With a multiplicity of traits, improvisation unbalances the border between modern and postmodern dance and, like the project of the avant-garde according to Sayre, it is ongoing and never 'complete'.

That dance is passed on from dancer to dancer is strongly indicative of this lineage of practice. Many of my own teachers have best informed me when I danced *with* them or kinesthetically 'listened' as I watched them dance. The process of teachers absorbing knowledge from their teachers, and thereby from their teacher's teacher implicates dance as a cumulative and responsive practice. Notation of a dance or any documentation will never capture the energy and physical experience of dance. The art form is essentially a 'live' pursuit in which the keepers and teachers of this knowledge are dancers themselves. For example, the knowledge that is conveyed in a ballet class given by dance luminary Lucette Aldous is not only of steps and instructions but of a tangible weight of her own training and experience that enables her students to receive and absorb the information with some understanding of the historical context loaded in those steps.

This lineage of practice becomes palpable in the accumulated responses of an experienced improviser. However, the physicality inherent in the transference of experience from one dancer to another in this system is not without its own inescapable structures and hierarchies.

CHAPTER 2: Perceptions, Hierarchies, & Structures

“A continuous present, and using everything, and beginning again” (Stein in Steinman, p85).

Improvisation, as I practice it, resides within a duality of continually locating itself in the present precisely by acknowledging the presence of past experiences in order to map and perform a dance of and in the moment. Inclusive of both intimately personal experiences of imagination, physical imprints, and the traceable lineage that is embodied in any one dancer, I believe “truly experimental work that has an organic and not merely a spasmodic growth can only be arrived at in the light of what has already been achieved by other workers in the field” (Roose-Evans, p55). The lineage of practice in improvised performance is not necessarily revealed or accessed in a linear form but as a kind of ongoing historical feedback loop that informs, recalls, questions and challenges the development of the dance. Sayre identifies the complexities of the ‘present’ and its relationship to the past:

There are, then, two separate poetics of the present – a largely modernist one which sees the ‘present’, in the immediacy of experience, something like an authentic ‘wholeness’, a sense of unity and completion that is the ‘end’ of art, and another, postmodern one which defines the present as perpetually and inevitably in media, as part of an ongoing process, inevitably fragmentary, incomplete and multiplicitous (Sayre, p175).

Sayre goes on to say that the postmodern poetic of the present is often nostalgic for the modernist version “as if, having lost the present – or rather, the fullness of presence – we are somehow embarrassed to admit it” (Ibid). I suggest that improvisation is concerned with and located within a dialogue between these ‘poetics’. While improvised dance aims toward a fullness of presence through the inextricable link between the dancer and the dance, it is also fundamentally aware of itself as an ongoing process. The postmodern aspect of performance, which applies to improvisation “occurs as a making visible of contingencies or instabilities, as a

fostering of differences and disagreements, as transgressions of that upon which the promise of the work itself depends and so a disruption of the move toward containment and stability” (Kaye, p23). Therefore, an improvised movement is definitive only in the exact moment it is performed: “there are no left-overs, the gazing spectator must try and take everything in (Phelan, 1993, p148).

The approach to improvisation can be made from many angles and found in many processes. As it does not have its own officially codified, copyrighted or scripted technique, other forms of physical practice are often drawn on to provide access to the improvising potential of the personal. The personal is not altogether fashionable and, of course, is very hard to sell and it has to be said that many practitioners typically justify, align or inform their own processes and research through recognizable physical systems such as Body Mind Centering® (BMC), Skinner Release Technique, Feldenkrais, Alexander Technique, Aikido, Yoga, T'ai Chi Chuan, Authentic Movement and Contact improvisation. Even if not directly aligned with these practices, a personal practice can only come about in relation to accumulated experience and therefore is influenced by history, teachers and other physical techniques. Most of these recognized physical systems began as personal practices, and tend to inform improvisation through cultivating an awareness and attention to the present. Eva Karczag, a dancer/choreographer and teacher of the Alexander technique whose work is also informed by T'ai Chi Chuan and release work explains these practices

all acknowledge that body and mind are inseparable ... They all emphasise undoing- undoing habit, undoing preconceived ideas of body and mind ... They all stress the importance of being present, fully in this moment, aware, so that one can have the greatest freedom of choice. Ultimately, this is improvisation (Karczag, p41-42).

The personal in dance today generates suspicions and, as a result, I inevitably ask myself or hear asked of me are such questions like, do you improvise to generate choreography? Do you improvise for therapy? Do you use improvisation to ‘release’ or ‘free’ yourself up before knuckling down to the ‘serious’ practice of making or

learning dance? Do you improvise as a warm up to get your own desire out of your system? Do you use improvisation as a way to 'turn on' and 'tune in' your receptors to receive dance information? If, in fact, you improvise to locate yourself in the middle of dancing and then stick to it as a process of getting to the bottom of your own desire to move, is this a valid and valuable practice? Dance, in the broadest of senses has, and will always fulfill many roles, but my particular interest lies in improvisation as a dedicated artistic practice. As Martha Graham famously said 'I am a dancer'. So am I, but the statement does not end in a full stop. Dancing is not everything all of the time. Improvisation is precisely about allowing the complexity of lived experience into the dance and this experience is by no means entirely composed of dance.

The wide range of practices under the banner of dance improvisation, however, has caused many people to assume it exists in a vague, non-committal type of space. Banes suggests that the major surge in the perception and understanding of improvisation happened in the 1970s with two major philosophies of practice - Steve Paxton's widely practiced duet form of contact improvisation and the more eclectic dance-theatre of the Grand Union group (Banes, 1994, p342). Dance improvisation today, influenced by these two practices, is located in a variety of philosophies and performance processes ranging from William Forsyth's 'improvisation technologies', to the use of text and mixed - media, to the exploration of energetic and emotive states or to more specific anatomical and spatial investigations. Contemporary improvised performance still owes much to the first Judson explosion in the 1960s when all choreographic methods and audience expectations were questioned resulting in an expansion of dance making that included a myriad of approaches and techniques.

Linked to a period of liberation and experimentation in the 1960s, Sally Banes states in no uncertain terms that improvisation "was the sixties" (Ibid, p341), in that it provided a platform for choice and democracy. Anne Marsh, in *Body and Self: Performance Art in Australia 1969 – 1992*, explains that the "bid to 'democratize art' was part of a larger social phenomenon which generally questioned the hierarchical structures associated with capitalism and its cultural institutions" (Marsh, p22).

Banes goes on to outline Cynthia Novak's suggestion that the repression of improvisation was a means to differentiate the 'professionalization' of modern dance in the twenties and thirties from the amateur, educational form of 'creative dance' (Banes, 1994, p341).

As Banes points out, the twentieth century model of modern dance was essentially authoritative: it was "the choreographer, not the dancers, who invented the movement in the studio to be presented onstage intact" (Ibid). Banes reminds us that even in nineteenth century ballet there was room for the star ballerinas to improvise within solo variations, whereas in the twentieth century the theatre director becomes an all powerful manager – translating to the choreographer in dance. Dumas at once supports the authority of the dancer by saying dance "is a living tradition whose history and inheritance is passed in direct lineage from dancer to dancer" (Dumas, p28) while at the same time confirming that the power remains with the choreographer. His comment that all "great dancers have been developed and nurtured in relation to choreographic artists" (Ibid) indicates that this process is achieved by meeting the 'rigorous' demands of the choreographer which again reduces the dancer to conduit.

The placement of improvisation within the context and hierarchies of contemporary dance practice and performance, like any marginalized group or process, serves to inform and fuel the work and effect the artists. These hierarchies were first tackled by Anna Halprin in 1945, when she moved away from what she found to be the highly imitative styles of modern dance in New York and later by the postmodern artists of the 60s and 70s, many of whom studied with Halprin in the late 1950s and early 60s.

Choreography and 'instant composition'

In *The Moment of Movement* (Blom and Chaplin, 1988), the authors express some contradictory views and outdated modes of improvisatory practice, but also articulate some interesting questions surrounding improvisation, in a practical and introductory

way. They effectively explain improvisation as it relates to the senses through the multiple intelligences theorized by Howard Gardner, which empower the improviser to think through the body (Blom and Chaplin, p14).

Direct experience builds a fund of tacit knowledge which becomes embedded in the body's response system. Responses mix with perceptions, building on each other to form a complex of knowing. Besides kinaesthetic responses, there are sensations, psychological awareness and agendas, mental images, and kinetic phenomena. The resultant accumulation is integrated into each person's response system to form a unique experiential body of knowledge (Ibid, p16).

However, I would argue that the expressions 'free improvising spirit' and getting 'lost' in the moment peppering their text only serve to again devalue the practice of improvisation that involves a continuous awareness and application of a responsive body of knowledge. The authors allude to improvisation as a wild and impulsive process that is most fulfilling when brought under control. "Taming is the role that Apollo plays in balancing the passionate, intoxicated Dionysus; it is necessary lest the intensity lead to chaos and avoid forming, which is the ultimate satisfaction and completion of the creative act" (Ibid, pxi). This statement unfortunately serves to align improvisation with outdated notions of 'woman as nature' with an innate 'wildness' in need of 'taming'. The authors also clearly separate and categorize the practice and the performance of improvisation whereas I believe most practitioners would emphasize each one as integral to the continuous reforming and informing of the other. However, the text is clear in asserting my belief that a

dancer's body and its capabilities are not his tool or his instrument. It is an intimate part of what he is and does, and who he is. There is no separation. Improvisers respond as an integrated whole, and the improv must be pursued as such (Ibid, p120).

Their claim that in India only mature dancers are allowed to improvise in performance gives rise to the varied values that cultures place on accumulated

experience. The fact that much of western contemporary dance has been preoccupied with a quest to embody aspects of eastern philosophy and practice is pointed in outlining the difficulty of aligning dance improvisation with a western ideology of the self that is shaped by consumerist economics.

Dance improvisation exists within an ongoing dialogue between the phenomenal and the objective body and is located in the phenomenal present. Needless to say this idea sits uneasily with many dance-makers and even dancers. Dancers are traditionally trained to hone their instrument, the body, to a point where it becomes a virtuoso vehicle to express another's 'music' or vision. A decidedly hierarchical structure is in place in many companies and institutions to reinforce this perception. The choreographer makes choices about who will be seen and in what role. The arrangement of soloist, principal and the *corps de ballet* or ensemble dictate many of these choices and provide structures for choreographing. The dancer in a choreographed work is often directed to make the movement 'their own', to 'own it.' With this direction, the choreographer is attempting to encourage the dancer to move with the weight of his or her own experience. The dancer comes to the performance, however, with a preconceived idea of the work and themselves in it, and tries to recapture and reproduce moments that 'worked' in rehearsal with the same quality and commitment, often over and over again.

Improvisation gives creative authority back to performers, which in my experience has led to a committed response from dancers who are equally responsible for the development of a work as it unfolds. This practice then, demands a rigorous awareness from the performer of both individual choices and of the direction of the performance. "Improvisation has a truly collaborative focus on decision making and process, demanding a tremendous amount of trust and responsibility both with the audience and co-performers" (Monson in Brickhill, 1999, p150). Improvised work creates an apparent tension in the performer as they, at once, create, present and experience the action while maintaining an awareness of each choice. At the same time both 'listening' and 'speaking', this simultaneous processing and producing mirrors everyday experience and decision-making. It is this immediacy and clarity or conflict of 'being' in each moment that is amplified in improvised performance.

Albright is interested in this 'live' aspect asking of the spectator: "Can we actually learn to see the dancer's bodily experience?" (Albright, p13).

Improvisation has a specific relationship to 'performance' in a way that is different from choreographed work, though both are revealed through the performative act. Peggy Phelan describes performance as the "'runt' of the litter of contemporary art" (Phelan, 1993, p148) as it leaves no hard evidence and therefore does not fit within the demarcation of capitalist ideology that demands a saleable reproduction. "Without a copy, live performance plunges into visibility – in a maniacally charged present – and disappears into memory, into the realm of invisibility and the unconscious where it eludes regulation and control" (Ibid). Performance gives value to experience that is not normally valued because it cannot be captured or reproduced; it exists in real time and leaves no visible trace. I would argue, however, that the trace of the performance whether choreographed or improvised, actually remains visible in the body of the performer.

That improvised dance is often perceived as secondary to its choreographed sister lies in the fact that it is intrinsically unstable and unrepeatable. Improvised dance leaves even *less historical* evidence than the already ephemeral nature of choreographed dance work and therefore is seen to carry even less weight.

In a choreographed work, the dance itself can be removed from the dancer on which it was made, with roles able to be transferred from person to person and performed by numerous dancers. In this case, the dance exists in a form that can be learned or remounted as 'repertoire' from video or from a dancer's long-term procedural and episodic memory. The choreography is not necessarily dependant on, or specific to the performance of any one dancer and, in this way, the dance has the potential for a longer life. The performance of a choreographed work requires the performer to call on long-term procedural memory to perform the sequence of steps as accurately as they were originally created. Ideally the dancer can affect a spontaneous relationship to the learnt material when it becomes embodied with practice. Through the performance of the choreography, the dancer appears present but "in the plenitude of its apparent visibility and availability, the performer actually disappears and

represents something else – dance, movement, sound, character, ‘art’” (Ibid, p150). This ‘disappearance’ of the individual performer marks the major difference between the performance of a choreographed dance and an improvised dance. Through improvisation the performer/dancer/person remains an incorporated entity, alive to each aspect of the performance persona and actively assuming authority of the dance and the dancing in relation to the ever shifting present. The performance of improvisation is personal and is located within a personal history, albeit a history that can, according to Foucault, only ever be a history of the present. (Lechte, p111). The dance that occurs in improvisation cannot be extracted or separated from the person who is at once dancing and making decisions about the dance. The person/performer remains visible in their ability to meet the gaze of the spectator in relation to the present moment.

Performing structures

Simultaneously a performance of process and an immediate finished product, improvised performance is an extemporaneous “double moment in which performing bodies are both objects of the representation and subjects of their own experience” (Albright, p13). The attempt of improvisation to marry the person to the performer and the performance is evident but can never truly result in an authentic union because of the fact that the performer *knows* they are performing. This acknowledgment of situation and performative context however, places the performer in a particular relationship with themselves that enables them to be spontaneous but also allows their responses to be susceptible to the whims and energies of the audience. In this way, improvisation can serve to reposition the power between the performer and the viewer, to stimulate a responsive exchange between the performer, who is alive to the gaze of the spectator in the immediate moment, and the spectator who recognizes the ‘present’ decisions and live choices of the performer in the space. This movement dialogue then, is a process of layering that happens in response to the immediate experience, as the performer sees themselves and adjusts, responds in a constant ebb and flow.

To me, improv is on the spot composition. Because you're constantly dealing with the textures and the space and the time and the mix of those things. You're monitoring it as you're going. Your body remembers what you've just done, your experience tells you where you want to get to. You've set up where you want to get to but you don't know exactly how you're going to get there. You're listening quite hard and there's all these layers of attention going on (Reitz in Dempster, 1991, p33).

In the 1990s and 2000s, there has been a shift among some dancers and dance-makers to commit to improvisational performance itself as “a statement about what dance is and what bodies mean in our culture” (Banes, 1994, p345), although Banes also points out that this could be due to an economic driven need to keep the control “at the lowest level of the dance production pyramid – that of the dancer herself” (Ibid, p347). Many artists are improvisers *and* choreographers who embrace the two forms and see them as being inextricably linked. David Zambrano “believes in improvisation as an art form, and choreography as a vehicle to further develop improvisation” (Zambrano in Zambrano, Tompkins & Nelson, p30). William Forsyth goes further to say that the “purpose of improvisation is to defeat choreography, to get back to what is primarily dancing. I consider choreography to be a secondary result of dancing” (Forsythe, p24).

Choreographers have long used improvisation in dance making and performance as a mechanism for challenging and pushing their own creative boundaries. Improvisation in dance making has existed for as long as dance has - one cannot engage in one without the other. With the premise of the body as unstable and never the same, I believe there is an element of improvisation in every dance performance – even in the most rehearsed of works. “There is no ‘authentic’ body. It is at the mercy of our lived experience which continuously shapes and reshapes it. The body is extremely reactive, responding and adapting to the slightest impulses and influences” (Schmale, in Allsopp & deLahunta, p66). Each performance then is affected by the experience of the individual and external elements such as location, time and audience response. Dance can never be repeated because it is live and relies on the combination of live elements.

Improvisation in performance immediately brings the audience into the process/picture. As Yvonne Meier emphasizes, the form itself is political as the “audience is made privy to the dancer’s creative process: hierarchies that remove the performer from the spectator are undercut” (Meier in Banes, 1994, p345). The audience becomes an integral part of the context that will be a constant point of referral and departure for the performer. “The feeling that you’re offering a genuine experience to an audience – not hiding it from them, or forcing it on them. That puts us in the same environment, and it creates a positive exchange” (Smith in Roberts, 1998, p3). Along with the performers own internal dialogue, this immediacy and tangible presence of the audience will fuel the performance process. Jonathon Sinatra personally addressed the audience at the start of his recent improvised solo titled, *Physically & Psychologically Interrogated*. “Lets take a moment for you to get used to me and for me to get used to you” (Sinatra). Here Sinatra states what I believe to be the actuality of the first few minutes of an improvised performance. By vocalizing this initial exchange, a two-way relationship was established and a mutual inclusive rapport was maintained throughout the work. David Zambrano suggests that every “part of the working process is possible to perform as long as you are aware of what you are doing at that moment in relationship to your surroundings” (Zambrano in Zambrano, Tomkins & Nelson, p30). He adds: “Now the question is: How can we bring out all the life experience into the *now* and use it?” (Ibid, p31).

Accused at times of being introspective and exclusive, improvisation has the potential to harness the energy of what is unknown and entice the audience into the experience. “What prevents the work from becoming esoteric – a private language – is an opening of attention to the world in which it takes place; the interlocking realms of personal and public experience” (Tufnell & Crickmay, p211). Not knowing what the opening movement will be automatically creates a highly charged atmosphere between performers that will be felt simultaneously by the spectator. The knowledge that you don’t know what’s around the corner is a shared reality. Thus, the challenge for the performer is to make these discoveries visible.

One option, in order not to alienate the viewer, is to make these choices visible through a technique employed by Lisa Nelson:

to make the decision-making of the performer – what we're experiencing and doing – audible. For example, calling 'Stop!' or 'Restart!' to change the situation. All of it aloud, so that the communication gets really hot, and you can stand behind your decisions with action. And then an audience starts to understand, get curious (Nelson in Zambrano, Tomkins & Nelson, p36).

This is a highly directed approach and one of two broad structures in terms of live improvised performance. The second is what Trisha Brown termed the 'blank slate approach' during her involvement with the Grand Union which involved going into the performance with no pre-meditated ideas (Brown in Banes, 1987, p225). It is necessary to note that artists employ a wide range of methods in approaching dance making and performance in response to different concerns in their careers.

The choice to broadcast the action as it happens through a 'blank slate' approach then becomes a structure that emerges and is built from within as the performance progresses. The other structure is one that is imposed prior to the performance, often in the form of a score. Often there is a crossover of these two ideas as the body already carries traces of past scores and experiences – so even entering the space with no intention other than to find an intention becomes a score or structure. Martin Keogh explains that he prefers to work without a score. However, he chooses to work with performers who have a "rich history and dance chemistry" with him in order that the audience can read this history and chemistry (Keogh in Roberts, 1999, p8). Jan Van Opstal, a guest with Magpie Music Dance Company says of the experience: "There's the contradiction between negotiation and letting things happen. You are in a situation where you have to let things happen but if you let everything go nothing happens, so you have to be clear and balanced" (Opstal in Duck et al, p18). She explains how one impulse can be the catalyst for a new direction in the work: "It just happened, but one tiny little second after you begin to structure, you "know", you want to – not repeat – but go onwards, developing it. So, the second after, you're not only surprised, you're going onwards to something" (Ibid).

Improvisation in performance is concerned with making instant compositional choices using the language of dance in response to other performers and internal dialogues in an extemporized present. When Banes asks “Is dance-making an act of construction and craft or a process of decision making?” (Banes, 1987, p16), I would answer that in improvisation there is a constant dialogue between the two. Improvisation requires constant decision-making and analysis of internal and external elements that motivates the movement and, therefore, composition skills.

One might argue that improvisation’s process of instant decision-making is a means to avoid presenting a decision about what is important in the performance. In fact, I believe by not pre-judging each movement on an aesthetic basis before the performance allows for the discovery of new movement states. As a choreographer, my intention at this stage is to invent movement material through the freedom that a structured improvisation provides. I am committed to expanding the potential for new movement experiences rather than reinforcing patterns by setting choreography.

Journeying through a process of discovery in front of an audience is a balance between following your own desire to move while keeping the door open and inviting the viewer in with you. Jennifer Monson describes this as a kind of navigation.

As an improviser I am always trying to negotiate and develop my relationship with the audience, to expand from a kind of general sense of openness and vulnerability, to experiment with more complex, even manipulative relationships. I like to use the metaphor of the bridge, because the exchange of information and energy with an audience during improvisational performance is so dynamic. It’s the audience that makes a performance happen. If I feel an audience just isn’t getting what I’m doing, then I’ll up the ante somehow. But then, if we’re connecting in an inspired way, I’ll try to hold that window open, infuse generosity. It can be quite terrifying. It’s hard to have too much of a good thing (Monson in Brickhill, 1999, p154).

As an audience member, one has the interesting opportunity to watch a performer watching and responding to another performer. Is this double action then once removed as a viewing experience or is it somehow even closer to viewing another's immediate lived experience? Watching a performer who is, in turn watching another performer can reveal intricacies in a performance and produce a heightened sense of awareness in your own observations and experience. The audience has an immediate relationship to improvised dance in that they know they are watching something that is unfolding before them, unlike a choreographed dance in which the viewer can be reasonably comfortable (as much as one can be in the presence of live humans at work) that the performers have got it under control and that any stunts or danger have been rehearsed for maximum effect.

Improvising in performance is a skill that requires instantaneous decision-making by the performer, who incorporates an awareness of the body and its relationship to time and space, knowledge of choreographic tools and a desire to dance with the unknowable. If all performance is unrepeatably and improvisation offers no sequence of steps that can be rehearsed, then what is accumulated? I would argue that all performance experience is accumulated and stored in the body as a resource for the next performance. As one of my students put it, "We don't lose experience we just lose the pathways to accessing it."

CHAPTER 3: In Process: Improvisation As A Performative Practice

Movement improvisation is a form of research, a way of peering into the complex natural system that is a human being. It is, in a sense, another way of “thinking”, but one that produces ideas impossible to conceive in stillness (De Spain, 1994, p58).

Philosophies of the present in process

The processes of practice, performing practice and practicing performance in improvisation are drenched in the personal. In March 1999, Jennifer Monson made a resounding impact on me when I participated in her workshop at *Antistatic* and performed in her work *Rumpsack* at Dancehouse in Melbourne. The experience ricocheted within my own body of experience, expanding my awareness of my own potential for movement. A visit to New York followed, where I was privy to the personal practice of Monson and other artists including the wonderful DD Dorvillier, KJ Holms and Sara Rudner. Almost three years later and able now to define my own point of interest, I still remember the moment when Monson excavated a way into my consciousness of dancing; after moving intensely for a long period, Monson directed us to be still and, in that expansive moment, I experienced a range of dancing that surprised and invigorated me. Yes it was grand, unfashionable and philosophical and probably a culmination of a range of contemporaneous events. Whatever the surrounding circumstances, I was moved and I ‘felt’ dancing. I was involved with the dance and now see this as a seminal shift in redefining my ongoing relationship to dance. With the development of my own work, I am now somewhat sadly able to objectify the passion I experienced in March 1999, though traces of that engagement remain in my body. As Deborah Hay advises, there are “hairline shifts and once the shift happens you can’t go back to just that one understanding of the body” (Hay in Refshauge, p66).

When I first connected with Monson, she was experimenting with the concept of energy through processes that developed “powerful energetic states” which could

“sustain their own spontaneous compositional integrity”. These processes and her current project of mapping improvisation through a process of ‘navigation’ have influenced my own research and practice. Monson has continued to be a mentor and her visiting contribution to my *response* project in November 2000 is documented in Part Two and in the accompanying video footage. Renowned for her “explosive physicality”, Monson’s dancing evokes the weight of her accumulated responses in performance, which “supports a more profound experience of her being-in-the-world” (Albright, p54). Like Albright, when I watch Monson dancing, “I see a continuity, a movement history that bespeaks a future as well” (Ibid, p55). The way that Monson intensely locates and grounds her point of interest both energetically and compositionally in performance demands an immediate response from both the audience and dancers with whom she is working. As Jennifer Dunning of the New York Times writes, “the way it builds and wanes suggest careful crafting. It is an impressive balance that takes improvisational dance an unexpected step ahead” (Dunning).

In terms of lineage, Monson trained at Sarah Lawrence College, has worked collaboratively with many artists including Zeena Parkins and David Zambrano and has worked specifically with Authentic Movement practices and the Skinner Releasing Technique introduced to her by Yvonne Meier. Meier studied extensively with Joan Skinner and uses both Skinner Releasing and Authentic Movement techniques in her practice, which Monson, who has worked with Meier since 1983, describes as ‘high-risk’, ‘wild, anarchic and provocative’ (Monson, 1999, p15). As both a practitioner and a teacher of the Skinner Releasing Technique, Meier explains that the images open pathways to creativity and generate a depth of experience through the option to ‘become’ or ‘be’ an image. “The images of releasing guide you into your body to where you move from at the same time allowing you to relate to the outside” (Ibid). Joan Skinner developed her releasing technique in the early 1960s through working alone on simple ballet exercises at the barre using Alexander principles to break down the movements, traditionally experienced as a series of set muscular executions learnt by rote, into logical and kinaesthetic levels. Skinner applied this process in her teaching of modern dance, where students responded to images that became metaphors for each kinaesthetic experience. By allowing a

process to unravel in this way, the traditional structure of the class soon broke down into a non-linear format where the process of personal exploration drove the content and pace. “In dance we tend to think of processes leading to product and of course choreographers use processes in this way. They use the process of improvisation to find a choreographic idea, to find a form. But I am talking about looking at things differently and looking at process as a product” (Skinner in Dempster, 1994, p20). Skinner focussed on developing improvisation as a performance form and developed ‘image clusters’ that she likened to haiku, “because they’re brief and poetic and hopefully send out some kind of resonance or reverberation” (Ibid, p24), which the dancers would then embody and respond to. Working with an image in this way became a method of bridging the shift between practice and performance through the development of a kind of ‘altered state’. Mary Fulkerson observes that Skinner’s approach today “combines a knowledge of Jungian psychology with creative imagery in stillness and movement exploration” (Fulkerson, p4). Many well known artists have integrated Skinner’s approach into their own practices and Skinner herself likes to think of her technique as “the dance that underlies dance forms” (Skinner in Dempster, 1994, p20).

Contrasting this approach is the practice of Authentic Movement, where “you move not from given images but from inner impulses which can be emotional, aesthetic, kinaesthetic, or states of being” (Meier in Monson, 1999, p15). Authentic Movement is a therapy first developed by Mary Starks Whitehouse that was originally called Movement-In-Depth. Its appeal to artists is in its physical approach through which “movement is the personality made visible” (Authentic Movement Institute, <http://www.authenticmovement-usa.com/index.htm>). Based again on Jung’s method of active imagination, the technique is a *self-directed* form “in which individuals may discover a movement pathway that offers a bridge between the conscious and the unconscious” (Ibid). The practice encourages ‘being seen’ and ‘seeing’ and involves moving with eyes closed in order to listen and respond to inner prompts or ‘cellular impulses’ in the presence of a receptive witness. “Gradually the invisible becomes visible, the inaudible becomes audible, and explicit form is given to the content of direct experience” (Ibid). In the accompanying video footage, Monson describes

Authentic Movement as a way to access a sense of one's 'home' in the body, which is especially useful as a touring artist in orienting oneself in a new place.

“Front keeps changing” (Allen, p26).

The fact that dance improvisation is most strongly aligned with the 1960s makes it of no surprise that most artists who have influenced improvisational processes were initially active in this period, including Joan Skinner, Deborah Hay, Richard Foreman, Anna Halprin, Merce Cunningham and the Judson artists. Discussing this period, although recognizable as the trace of my own interest, is made both easier and more difficult with forty years of hindsight. The influence of these artists on the continued practice of improvisation in the twenty first century is made increasingly significant as all of these artists are still practicing and challenging the status quo in their various pursuits.

The project of connecting the body/mind and presence is magnified in artist Deborah Hay, an exponent of the Judson processes who aligns her practice directly and simply with perception. “My perception is creativity” (Hay in Refshauge, p63). Hay goes further to describe her ‘process of the process of being’ as “Presence. It is about a willingness not to know. To not be afraid of not knowing. And to be curious about continuing to engage in it” (Ibid, p68). Through her teaching, she encourages the play and presence of more than ‘53 trillion cells’ in the body to at once ‘invite being seen’. Her work attempts to go beyond the purely physical body, attempting to awaken and expand the danced experience by perceiving and responding to visible and invisible feedback in performance. Hay uses the word ‘meditate’ rather than ‘improvise’ because meditating encompasses a totality that the idea of improvising doesn’t completely fill in her consciousness. Hay’s concern with the present, recognizes the fact that it is perpetually transient:

Our consciousness is dying from the present all the time. The seduction to be elsewhere is so profound that I need all of you and all of me to remember to be here in order to reflect this creative passing moment... This dancing is

where I practice being here. Other people do it in other ways. That's my relationship to dancing. It is my practice of playing awake. Using my whole body- using all of this to be awake and present and changing, not fixed (Ibid, p64).

Hay's axiom, "Dying to the present moment" (Ibid, p64), is comparable with Richard Foreman's manifesto that states: "if each moment is new, if we die to each moment as it arises, we are alive" (Foreman in Kaye, p53). A playwright and director, Foreman's work came to fruition when he formed the Ontological-Hysteric Theatre in 1968, though his work began early in the 60s amidst the rise of the cross-disciplinary avant-garde experimentation pursued by John Cage and Cunningham and the Judson experiments. Against mainstream performance culture, Foreman sees the process of developing a series of connecting ideas as a trap of western habit proclaiming, "Development (sequential) is death" (Ibid, p52). Foreman sees such sequential development as a process of objectification that is "a desire for security and, ultimately perceptual and intellectual sleep" (Ibid). Foreman's theatre is highly directed, very precise and controlled in performance but I align his writing and thinking processes with improvisation in that he is concerned with moment-to-moment creation. This process pertains to my own improvisation practice in that he emphasises the dialogue that rages between developing an idea and stopping or tripping the momentum so that another idea can emerge. Although Foreman is concerned with breaking momentum he does not approve of the chance procedures used by the Cage/Cunningham experiments, charging them with another kind of 'objectification'. In his 1972 Ontological Hysteric Manifesto 1, he lists three 'distortions', rejecting both "logic - as in realism" and "chance & accident & the arbitrary" to make way for the third;

the new possibility (what distorts with its weight) – a subtle insertion between logic and accident, which keeps the mind alive as it evades over quick integration into the mental system. CHOOSE THIS ALWAYS! (Ibid, p53).

Subverting the desire for finality, “Foreman would seem to direct his strategies towards a wrong footing of the viewers’ move towards closure, towards interpretation and understanding” (Kaye, p52). “Thus the performance undercuts itself as it traces out, at each successive moment, expectations that are systematically let down” (Ibid, p54).

Working mainly with untrained performers, Foreman forged a relationship with Kate Manheim who became his partner and one of his main performers. From ‘71 to the late 80s, Manheim was known for her high energy on stage, which she achieved through techniques that allowed her to “to keep myself in a state when I’m always surprised by what I’m doing or what is happening” (Davy, p29). To enter this unbalanced state, she practiced techniques of cultivated nervousness, applying attention to specific physical tasks that often caused her discomfort, and alternating between fierce concentration in the moment and allowing her mind to ‘wander’. Of her ‘aliveness’ on stage, Manheim maintains that the emphasis lies “not [in] the most present but rather [in] the most aware of being present” (Ibid, p31). Again, the dialogue between the phenomenal and objective body in performance is accentuated. Dance improvisation has a similar focus, according to movement artist Helen Poyner, in that the “body becomes the meeting ground between inner and outer worlds” (Poyner, p30). Such an awareness allows the performer to maintain a sense of self, not completely internalised but responding, at the same time, to their surroundings and others.

By constantly changing from moment to moment, Foreman resists the tradition of consolidating meaning. “Through shifting and self-reflexive strategies the notion that meaning can somehow *belong* to the ‘work’, that its elements can be understood *possessing* its meaning, is directly challenged” (Kaye, p70). In choreography ‘meaning’ is generally thought to be found in the ‘work’ itself. I would argue that ‘meaning’ cannot be owned by the ‘work,’ rather it is located in the act of performance and is different with each viewing. In improvisation, ‘meaning’ in the ontological sense is relative to a continual tracing and re-tracing of meaning in each moment. Foreman’s work is focussed on the present exchange of the ‘event’ between the viewer and the presentation of the work, decentering the “sign as meaning” to

allow the audience to be exposed to “the contingency of the work” (Ibid, p70). Improvisation alludes to this contingency in the latent energy that is apparent in the decisions of an improvising performer and in the energy the audience brings to the performance. Foreman also talks about ‘evidence’ as a function of his art that can also be applied to improvisation as:

an INTERSECTING process--scanning--which is in the perpetual constituting and reconstituting of the self. The new work of art-as-evidence leaves a tracing in matter of this intersecting, and encourages a courageous “tuning” of the old self to the new awareness (Foreman, p152).

He talks about a new art that is “not EXTRACTED from the flux of life, and is therefore in no sense a mirror or representation-- but a parallel phenomenon to life itself” (Ibid, p151).

Anna Halprin too was active in breaking down the division between art and life by collapsing the divide between performer and audience and between performer and the everyday person through her philosophy intersecting anatomy and psychology. Halprin danced with Humphrey and Weidman and studied with Martha Graham and Hanya Holm but her main influences came from training she received under Margaret H'Doubler at the University of Wisconsin. H'Doubler's focus on kinesiology and anatomy and Mabel Todd's work with Ideokinesis lead Halprin to develop improvisation with the images generated in environmental and anatomical explorations “to get past dance clichés to more basic human responses” (Jowitz, p317). Halprin's work involved reconnecting dancers with their personal feelings and emotions,

as the most powerful material that any artist could choose to work with...You won't believe this, but when I first started working in this new way, the fact that I was acknowledging emotional material was considered therapy, not dance. You could interpret emotion, but to actually have your own, to express the truth of your own personal mythology and experiences, this was not considered dance art (Wolf).

According to the Tamalpa Institute, which Halprin founded in 1978 with a basis in her Life/Art process, her work has developed into a transformational form of healing through dance, and her work with AIDS' patients continues to challenge and confront traditional dance practice;

The Halprin Process is based on a holistic approach that explores the interplay between the inherent knowledge of the body and its creative connection to our life stories. The underlying premise of this work is that the imprints of life events are housed within the body: when remaining at the unconscious level, these imprints may lead to imbalance and conflict; when explored and expressed consciously and creatively, the connection between body, mind and emotion make a vital contribution to the artful development of the self (Tamalpa Institute).

In the 1950s and 60s, Halprin was instrumental in collapsing the tradition of the proscenium arch by challenging the role of the audience and revealing processes that were normally hidden. Forging an interdisciplinary and task-oriented relationship to movement in performance was a central idea that fed directly into the experiments of Judson Dance Theatre through the people that came to work with her, including Yvonne Rainer, Simone Forti and Trisha Brown among others. "The dancer could be a musician, a musician could be a dancer, the audience could participate" (Halprin in Smith, p6). Simone Forti, who came to New York in 1960 after working with Halprin in the mid 50s, observes, that improvisation with Halprin "provided a laboratory for exploring the natural interface of body, perception and imagination" (Forti, 1999, p14). Halprin developed 'scores' as loose structures to house and organise improvisations, a practice that continues to influence generation after generation of dance artists. As Halprin's work with improvisation became more and more centred on relating theatre experience to life experience she "became convinced that each performer could only essentially perform him or herself" (Halprin, p112). Halprin used Gestalt therapy with her San Francisco Dancers' Workshop, formed in 1959, to practice being in the 'now' in order to fulfil their desire "to live an authentic situation, not play-act with being authentic" (Ibid). In the late 60s, Halprin presented improvisations as public happenings and displaced the notion of a traditional

audience to the point of designing 'scores' for the audience, completely blurring the line between spectator and performer.

Structuring process- a displaced democracy

Of course I can and will present the danced facts of the physicality in these philosophies of process but I emphasize that any descriptive activity is weighted with the evidence of what is not seen, read or written but danced.

Influential at the same time as Halprin was Merce Cunningham who also challenged the conventions established by Graham and Humphrey, preceding the Judson experiments with his move *away* from the emotional centre of dance experience. He too focussed on the body but in an abstract way that removed the act of dancing from emotion. Instead of Halprin's interdisciplinary approach to dance, Cunningham advocated *independence* of each art form and, in the 'purity' of his investigation of dance, he is a true 'modernist'. His philosophy of dance lies in contrast to the emotive and expressive centres espoused by Halprin and, before her, Graham. His basic premise was that dance by its very nature was already a fact of life so there was no need for dancers to project from a place of 'feeling' because they cannot help but already do so. "Our racial memory, our ids and egos, whatever it is, is there. If it is there, it is there; we do not need to pretend that we have to put it there" (Cunningham, 1952, in Vaughan, p86). This said, Cunningham's practice of dance is still centred in the moment of performance through the act of dancing which is "most deeply concerned with each single instant as it comes along, and its life and vigor and attraction lie in just that singleness. It is as accurate and impermanent as breathing" (Ibid, p87). It is fact, so why double state it? "We give ourselves away at every moment. We do not, therefore, have to *try* to do it" (Ibid, p86). I argue that it is necessary to again acknowledge this fact of 'being' because much 'contemporary' dance today offers 'blank' stares of dancers who reveal nothing (of themselves and therefore of the dance) or applies an acted sensibility layered on the dance. Seeing the dancing of the Cunningham Company in action at the 2001 Perth International Arts Festival, I appreciate the humanness and 'fullness' of dancing that Cunningham

talks about and understand that his point of view, although expressed differently, equally addresses the moment of presence in performance that is vital in improvised dance.

He also argues, influenced by Zen principles, that “each act of life” and, therefore, each act of dance “can be its own history: past, present and future, and can be so regarded, which helps to break the chains that too often follow dancers’ feet around” (Ibid). If these chains allude to the dancer’s personal history and experience, I argue that such ‘chains’ can in fact support, free and surprise the dancer in improvised performance. Though Cunningham is famously known for his association with John Cage and his aleatory processes, his use of chance to “diminish the likelihood that the work will be tainted by expressive gestures” and thereby exclude “the self from asserting its authority over the work” (Sayre, p105) is fundamentally structured by the way chance is employed in the arrangement and rearrangement of his own choreography. When he did experiment with improvisation in his 1963 work, *Story*, it was taken out of the repertory after only a year. The dancers were given the ‘freedom’ to insert their ‘own’ choreography and Rauschenberg improvised each night with the lights and the décor through found objects particular to each theatre or venue, often participating in the action on stage himself. Banes writes that the ‘failure’ of *Story* is important in clarifying the difference between chance choreography and improvisation in that it signals “the friction between two irreconcilable ways of making artistic choices” (Banes, 1994, p109). Dancer Carolyn Brown remarked that Cage “didn’t trust us to do indeterminate dancing” and Cunningham “hated [*Story*], because he couldn’t control it” (Brown in Banes, 1994, p108). This issue of control is one that separates chance processes from improvisation. As Banes explains, improvisation generates spontaneity:

through totally conscious control, residing anarchically in each individual performer – the exact opposite of the surrender to fate implied by using chance techniques. It also allows for movement content and performance style beyond the gamut of the choreographer’s imagination. Improvisation democratises the choreographic procedure by relocating it in the

performers. But it also creates the risk of a “failed” performance (Banes, 1994, p109).

Perhaps this was not a chance that Cunningham desired to take.

Discussions of structure and process in dance almost inevitably lead to questions of authority and democracy in terms of defining a process and ways of working with people. The fact that dance, as an art form, requires the cooperation and collaboration of actual dancers, means that subjective as well as collective ideologies are integral to organising dance. According to Ramsay Burt, Graham and Humphrey, though in different ways, shared an underlying theme of “the dynamics of the group and the relationship between the individual and the group” which “manifested itself in the precarious balance between the need for social conformity and the freedom to explore individual aspirations” (Burt, p140). This balance was weighed up in Cunningham’s relinquishing of control through chance methods, though ultimately he has always maintained a tight rein over his dancers in terms of movement and space.

The struggle of post-modern dance to subvert traditional hierarchies, specifically the powerful choreographers in dance and theatre, is amplified in the work of Yvonne Rainer. After working with Anna Halprin for the summer of 1960, Rainer joined Robert Dunn’s workshop at the Cunningham studios with, among others, Simone Forti and Steve Paxton. Dunn posed ‘problems’ for the participants to ‘dance’ using the chance methods he had studied with Cage. The fact that Dunn’s “Cagean idea that chance offered an alternative to the masterpiece was operating very strongly” (Rainer, 1974, p7) irked Rainer who was still ‘secretly’ drawn to making ‘masterpieces’. Hence on July 6, 1962, at her suggestion, the group presented a ‘Concert of Dance’ that was to become known as Judson Dance Theatre. In her own words, Rainer admits: “If I thought that much of what went on in the workshop was a bunch of nonsense, I also had a dread of isolation, which made me place great value on being part of a group” (Ibid, p8). When Dunn’s workshops ended shortly after, Rainer and Paxton formed another ‘workshop’ that continued the project of the Judson Dance Theatre. During Dunn’s workshops, Rainer was deeply affected by an improvisation performed by Simone Forti that

brought the god-like image of the 'dancer' down to a human scale more effectively than anything I had seen. It was a beautiful alternative to the heroic posture which I felt continued to dominate my dance training. (At the Graham School they had told me that I should become more 'regal' and less athletic!) (Rainer, Ibid, p5).

Rainer's work developed to propose "a meeting between chance method and precisely the play of personal taste and intention Cage's disciplines were dedicated to overcoming" (Kaye, p102). In 1964, the group's last Concert, 14, focussed on improvisation and Rainer presented *Some Thoughts on Improvisation*, where she spoke about the process as she danced it. Banes describes Rainer's process.

She lists three aspects of choice: impulses, anti-impulses, ideas. The action, she notes, can come from any of these, including the decision not to follow an impulse. It is, finally, the instinct of the performer, including the assertion of physical and mental control and mastery of anxiety, that fuels the performance, she concludes. "When it goes forward it moves with an inexorable thrust and exerts a very particular kind of tension: spare, unadorned, highly dramatic, loaded with expectancy – a field for action. What more could one ask for?" (Rainer in Banes, 1994, p224).

This last official Concert signalled the splintering of the artists into various individual projects. However, by 1970, many of these same artists were to come together again to form the Grand Union. Evolving out of Rainer's *Continuous Project -Altered Daily*, the Grand Union performed group improvisations as a collective that involved dance and theatre in what Rainer termed 'live behaviour' until 1976. *Continuous Project – Altered Daily* focussed on the desire to value and expose the working processes experienced in rehearsals by including them in performance, as Rainer notes in the program.

A curious by-product of this change has been the enrichment of the working interactions in the group and the beginning of a realization on my part that various controls that I have clung to are becoming obsolete: such as

determining sequence of events and the precise manner in which to do everything. Most significant is the fact that my decisions have become increasingly influenced by the responses of individual members (Rainer, p129).

Over a year, Rainer's 'Project' accumulated almost two hours of material from which participants determined the order of the performance while they were performing.

The Project's very transformation of itself through performance is a reaching toward the contingencies and instabilities of the 'event', an attempt to allow itself to be seen to be penetrated by unstable and unpredictable exchanges and processes. In this way Continuous Project – Altered Daily emphasises and makes visible its own contingent nature as performance, offering not a 'thing', an 'object', but a series of developing and transforming fragments, displacements and exchanges (Kaye, p117).

Rainer's changing relationship to her own material and indeed her shifting authority in the work set the scene for the Grand Union to come into being. As Hay observes, once the shift has been made, you can't go back and Rainer understood that "the process of democratisation and disintegration had already, I think, from the first moment, begun its inexorable progress and I just went with it. There was no way of getting back in control" (Rainer in Banes, 1987, p224). This discovery in part, led toward "a moral imperative to form a democratic social structure" that became the Grand Union (Rainer in Sayre, p123). Rainer herself writes that the "weight and ascendancy of my own authority have come to oppress me ... my role of boss-lady to my people-material, the 'people-material' as responding human beings" (Ibid). In both the Grand Union and *Continuous Project - Altered Daily* the 'live' objective to be 'real' placed the performers in a very different role in relation to each other and to the audience. As Rainer says of the experience in the Grand Union: "To be taxed to the limit's of one's inventiveness creates terrible pressure. That may be one reason the Grand Union ended ... there was just too much pressure" (Rainer in Banes, 1987, p234). The Grand Union performed with various artists for over six years and changed the face of 'contemporary' dance practice, as well as expectations of the

dance audience because, as Trisha Brown points out: “Subversion was the norm” (Brown in Banes, 1987, p225). The performances worked to no script or score, instead, the exposed thought processes of the artists, as live people living/dancing *became* the performance. Banes recalls:

Because the Grand Union’s art was so close to life, the subversions felt closer, more dangerous. And because the subversions often had to do with the nature of performance itself – someone called out ‘intermission!’ when a situation became overloaded, or announced that they were tired and then said “The End” – they were unfamiliar and unsettling” (Banes, 1987, p221).

In all of the processes examined and practiced by the artists in this chapter, the project to close the gap between art and life is evident. Moreover, in each situation, artists employed various methods or degrees of improvisation to generate this increasing proximity. Halprin and Skinner express the union of self and art which “rather than seeking to mold The Body, considered each individual body and its potential” (Jowitt, p317) through the use of imagery - Skinner with anatomical images and Halprin with images drawn from environment and emotion. Hay and Foreman bridge the same divide through applying attention to presence and the present moment. Cunningham protests that there is no divide, only the fact of living/dancing, and Rainer presents art as *process* thereby revealing ‘art’ as lived experience through collaborative projects like the Grand Union that valued the potential of all movement, speech and action in performance.

The phenomenon of art as life and lived experience as danced experience comes to the fore again at the turn of the twenty first century with the rush to dance the ‘new’. By acknowledging the accumulated traces of each of these artists’ processes in my own work, however, I am practicing dance in the only way I believe it can be experienced - through lived and responsive bodies. But with a society encouraged by the media in individual desires for a more convenient, faster, hassle-free living, is the dancing body still interesting? Or have we moved on from the desire to understand a physical process that demands a ‘real-time’ experience and replaced ‘live’

environments with watching, recording and playing back our image in numerous formats, fast-forwarding to avoid the boring bits?

CHAPTER 4: www. 'live' dance: Dancing Bodies and Technology

“What does ephemeral mean?” the little prince asked the geographer on the sixth planet. It means: “which is threatened with impending death” he replied (Saint-Exupery, p35).

As our current cultural moment is buffeted on one side by the claims of virtual reality and electronic presence, and on the other by a politicized and commodified spirituality (from Christian fundamentalism to new age gurus), it behooves us to think more seriously about what theatre and performance have to teach us about the possibilities and perils of summoning the incorporeal. To what end are we seeking an escape from bodies? What are we mourning when we flee the catastrophe and exhilaration of embodiment? (Phelan, 1997)

My purpose in introducing technology at this moment in my argument is to draw attention to what I have observed as a parallel in the rise of various ‘new’ media in and around dance and the perceived rise in visibility of live improvised dance performance. The decision to include technology in a debate about live improvisation raises a number of complex issues and the link I am forging between them is fraught with paradoxes. Suffice to say that the discussion is necessary in locating dance improvisation as a relevant and ‘moving’ arts practice in contemporary culture. The various agendas and implications of both, performance forms that integrate technology and technological advancements, on the future of the human body deserved further investigation, but for this exploration, I will examine the development of technology and improvisation as trends that are weighted in one way or another with accumulated experience. I argue that these developments are not in fact positioned in opposition, as one might expect, but that the two quite necessarily feed each other, with each form more often than not informed by the other. Somewhat ironically, the desire for the continual present and the continual ‘new’ is a driving force behind both ‘new’ technologies and live improvised dance

performance. The ongoing project of these technologies is a part of lived experience and therefore is an integral part of the dance.

The culture of the ‘new’: again

One of the most alarming features of the discourse of new technologies ... is its tendency to repress the existence of previous technologies. Yelling, “I’m new, I’m new,” this new discourse, like most born-again devotees, forgets the technologies that preceded it and helped bring it into being (Phelan in Phelan & Lane, p9).

As I see it, artists’ fascination with machines at the turn of the twentieth century almost mirrors the obsession with the ‘new’ technologies as a vehicle for artists’ visions at the turn of the twenty-first century. This ongoing obsession with technology can be linked to the avant-garde project of colonizing new terrain, a concept, which can also be applied to improvisation practitioners with their desires to be in the continuous present. Though computers, video, and the cultivation of virtual reality are ‘born’ through human endeavor, technology itself is not ‘human’. However, developments in technology and in dance improvisation are both the result of accumulated human experience and the desire to explore human potential. The differences lie in the human experience of each genre’s manifestation. Improvisation ‘embodies’ experience as it is ‘lived’ whereas technology is produced, experienced and upgraded with the ‘newest’ development quickly superseded by the next innovation. Another major difference is that technology is inextricably linked to power, money and the arms’ race, and thus is propelled towards the effective destruction of the (human) enemy, while dance improvisation is embedded with the desire to embody and recognize human (life) experience and its creative, communicative function.

Modernity was in full swing in the first half of the twentieth century with increased urbanization and technological advancements enabling a rapid exchange of knowledge and ideas between major cities. With the fast linking train transport

systems and “the concurrent growth of telephone usage there was a novel awareness of the world as a dynamic interaction of simultaneous events, often thousands of miles apart, but which could be experienced in an instant” (Humphreys, p15). These developments were important in understanding the Dada and Futurist movements’ desires to embrace the present and break with the past. The Futurists focused on the new possibilities of technology and espoused a Nietzschean conviction of the artist as a kind of heroic superman, with “a critical ‘cutting edge’ vision that set the pace for society’s development” (Ibid, p19). Marinetti’s machine worshipping and political manifesto, signed by many avant-garde intellectuals of the time, can be seen as a “major development in the modernist project to reconfigure creativity, consciousness and aesthetic form in the light of the profound changes in technology and science that he had identified as the driving force in twentieth-century experience” (Ibid, p40). From this obsession with machines, technology and the ‘super human,’ one can draw frightening parallels with the current computer and Internet dominated experience of the twenty-first century. It must be said that this notion of the ‘super human’ also became aligned with Nazi propaganda that lead to devastation. In our current climate, emphasis on surpassing bodily intelligence is immanent in stem cell research and the endorsement of ‘wearable intelligence’ by the Pentagon with ‘universal soldiers’ wearing computers “embedded in their uniform” to fight a ‘twenty first century war’ sparked off by the September 11 attacks on the United States this year (Pentagon).

‘New’ multi-media objectives in dance are not new. As Steve Paxton asserts, the new ‘mixed media’ that arose in the 1960s, like the ‘hybrid arts’ of the 90s, presented dance, film and language in the same work, which was influenced by ideas of John Cage, Marcel Duchamp, and the surrealists among others. “By then the popular media and critical establishment were ready, and the mixed medium event was considered seriously and widely announced, after more than a half a century gestation period” (Paxton, p19). Paxton then points out: “The question arises, why did we not notice media mixed before? That is what is so interesting” (Ibid, p18). In a culture where “rebellion and revolution are just slogans that are used to sell sneakers” (McAdam, p58), the passion and transgression of dance in 2001 is different than it was in the 1960s. Growing up as part of what I would define as the MTV generation,

under the influence of Michael Jackson, Boy George and Madonna, I was heavily saturated in the pop and screen culture of the 80s and 90s. The MTV generation has now given way to the 'playstation' and preoccupation with the screen remains evident in the escalating production of video-dances. With its edited and controlled capture of the body dancing, video-dance is much more easily packaged and stable than a human body, with a more substantial life after its premiere.

Providing an instantaneous method of communication, the 'net' renders traditional notions of time irrelevant and offers a "World Wide Web" of information that can be accessed by any individual, economically privileged with a computer. That the obsession has been taken up by dance with 'new media' arts collaborations, currently the priority of arts agencies that fund 'cutting edge' works, leads one to question whether technology and its money-making agenda is defining artistic trends. Eleanor Brickhill suggests that perhaps the priorities of government funds have meant "the word 'improvisation' has simply been absent from the discussion even if it was present in many people's practice" (Brickhill, 2001, p11). One can draw an alarming parallel in this consumerist society, in that contemporary dance companies with the most money, including Chunky Move and ADT, at times almost mirror the ideas sprouted at the turn of the twentieth-century when "Machines, the life-force, capitalism and a violent sexual impulse were inextricably linked in the Futurist imagination" (Humphreys, p17). Dancers today in mainstream contemporary dance are more 'virtuosic' than ever, dancing faster, harder and arguably 'better' to electronic 'techno' sound-scores, wearing costumes often designed by the latest fashion designers. Joan Skinner notes that "audiences and critics in the west really want to see dynamic movement ... in the direction of hard edge and speed" (Skinner in Dempster, 1994, p22). Lloyd Newson adds: "People need to feel that every minute is filled up with another event, that they're not missing anything. There's this need for constant stimulation!" (Newson, p13). Skinner goes on to say that this trend "might be an expression of the times, this current sort of frenzy, it might be expressing something" (Skinner in Dempster, 1994, p22). Could it be that this expression is one of a perpetually accelerating sense of time provoked by media driven images and a postmodern prerogative that manifests itself in 'new' trends that are increasingly re-cycled from the past? Arguably dance here is closest to the

recognizable art/life ('lifestyle') image as reflected back to us in the media as it operates, at the top end, within a consumerist culture, marketing a slick product to a media savvy, youth 'target' audience. Dance critic Marcia Siegel suggests:

What's scary is not that art resembles life any more than it ever has, but that it resembles the mass fictions of television and advertising. Dancing has always had the potential for selling the body, and the display of the body is a perfect sales pitch for dance performance (Siegel in Phelan & Lane, p258).

This was highlighted in the 1980s with the rise of virtuosic and athletic dance performance and dancers within a culture of beautification, power and 'Body clubs'. After all, as Banes notes, "one of the cheapest, most convenient things to master is one's body" (Banes, 1994, p279). Though only in terms of superficial changes made to the physical exterior. The body cannot be traded in for a better or younger model...yet. But the 'upgrading' of dance and dancers that came to the fore in the 1980s saw the spectacle of dance become a commodity.

As Banes reasons, "Our dancing is always shaped by our attitudes towards the body" (Banes, 1994, p296) and currently projects to transcend the body through virtual and computer capture have their basis in control. This desire for control and the move away from the instability of the body can be seen in some of Cunningham's works that aimed to minimize subjectivity and emphasize the 'fact' of movement. One of his tactics was to present dancers with no visible trace of expression or emotion on their faces, a tactic which brought strong reactions from some commentators who saw the trend as dehumanizing and feared that it would "turn the dancer of the future into a mere robot" (Cohen, p105). Over 40 years on, Cunningham is still working in this way and has choreographed using the computer software 'Life forms' for over ten years. Currently this experiment has almost already been superseded by what is discussed as 'the redundant body, the virtual body and the cyborg' in cyberspace, by Dianne Currier in her article, *Absent, Mutated, Digitalised, Desexed – Posthuman Bodies in Cyberspace* (Currier, p49). The difference today is that audiences are not shocked and rarely express strong reactions at developments that are viewed as inevitable and expected signs of human 'advancement' and 'progress'. It is

interesting to note that even Cunningham himself, according to Siegel, once resisted efforts “to show his company on film for fear it would distort the audience’s expectations for live dancing” (Siegel, p102). Australian choreographer, Chrissie Parrott’s own research into motion capture technology interested her because of “the inherent need to work with the human body as the basis for data imagery”, (Parrott, p26), however, once the data has been collected the need for the live dancing body disappears. As A. William Smith alarmingly states in his paper ‘Dance and Technology: Armed with Imaginative Power’:

Why do my movement ideas have to be expressed by live dancers? So I don't have to work on my dance only at certain times, don't have to pay dancers, don't have to worry about someone not showing up for rehearsal, don't have to worry about money for costumes, don't have to do lighting rehearsals, don't have to rent a studio for rehearsals, don't have to deal with many things that traditionally frustrate me and make me financially poorer. I now feel more free, I have more choices in what I want to do and when I want to do it, I can use gravity if I want (but it is a choice, not a limitation), and I can have incredible settings and costumes change in a moment. It is freedom. It is power to do as I wish (Smith, <http://www.acad.ohio-state.edu/interface/S96/smith.html>).

Dance as I practice it, relies precisely on the unstable physicality of exchange between live dancing bodies. In some circles, however, the notion of ‘human’ does not necessarily even equate with the human body. With multi-media, the new ‘new’, virtual reality promises a new cyber ‘space’ and, as such, the trend is towards creating and ‘colonizing’ virtual states and spaces outside the body, thus enabling representation, objectivity and a degree of distance to be maintained from the site of the body itself. This physical distancing can also be seen within dance as Sally Gardner explains, where we treat codified dance forms such as ballet ‘as systems of representation’ so we can objectify and place the form at a “distance in order to see (and to come to know) it clearly” (Gardner, p162). Russell Dumas elaborates on this perspective saying:

Often when experience is codified into a dance technique the sense of it being a lived experience is diminished. The process of codification reduces the richness of experience. It becomes a series of muscular sets which speak primarily of a certain kind of achievement and mastery. Other resonances, other meanings are excluded (Dumas in Dempster, 1990, p14 sic).

The problematic issue of constantly justifying and redefining one's work to fit into an culture of the 'new', means that we are constantly pressured to produce works that are bigger, better and above all different. Dumas addressed this problem in 1984 with *Circular Quay*, using the same title for several different projects in one year to free himself from expectations, "that I would constantly change, that each thing I did would be different from anything else I'd done, that what I was doing two months ago could somehow be radically unconnected from my present concerns" (Ibid, p8). This line of thought applies equally to improvisation in that you don't have a 'known' product distinctive from previous works to present and market. Consequently, improvisation practitioners find it hard to compete for funds against the tangibly 'innovative' projects involving the new technologies. Within the current climate of arts seen as 'industry', Elizabeth Dempster points out, "audiences are described as consumers; audience members are consumers and there is a product, (an 'aesthetic experience') they consume" (Dempster, 1991, p29). Dempster goes on to say that the climate produces a pressure of presenting work "as if it's a completely known thing: "I do *This*." You people are going to have this kind of experience [which seems] very premature and forced...a kind of travesty [that] reduces the exchange that can happen" (Ibid).

At the turn of the twenty first century, with the spread of the Internet, the romance of speed and an obsession with technology are once again in fashion. Arguably, so is dance improvisation. Eleanor Brickhill asks "Is it true that Australian dance is currently undergoing a major resurgence of interest in improvisation as performance – or is it simply my personal bias towards the endlessly exhilarating environment in which I find myself?" (Brickhill, 2001, p11). Banes, among others has also mentioned this perceived trend (Banes, 1994, p347) and I have found it myself among many young dancers at WAAPA, who are looking to improvisation to provide

them with a personal voice in communicating a meaningful dialogue with dance and the world. It is also evident in the current push to establish a National Improvisation Festival in 2003. I believe dance improvisation is experiencing a 'new' awareness of the value of spaces inside the body/mind which, together with current multiple discourses on the body, makes the dancer ideally positioned to re-explore these human spaces. David Zambrano also predicts "body awareness, contact improvisation, and improvisation in performances are going to be a big hit" (Zambrano in Zambrano, Tompkins, & Nelson, p39). I see this trend occurring partly in response to the trend of 'new technology' inspired works and the dehumanizing of dance through the popular virtuoso and techno inspired "Euro crash and burn" work (Albright, p36), again created by predominantly male choreographers, and partly because dancers have reclaimed the body as a source of valued knowledge, experience and action. My main assertion on the increasing interest in dance improvisation in performance is due to my belief that humans are ever interested in human experience. This has been proven (somewhat unfortunately) by the huge success of 'reality' television. I think that a more sustainable, though probably idealistic, 'truth' can be found in the 'real-time' exchange between a performer who is making decisions in the moment and the human who is watching. Erin Brannigan suggests technology "relates to a desire to reach beyond the limitations of the body, transcending time, space, gravity or place", qualifying this statement with: "Of course we can never actually escape the body. All our efforts remain in relation to our condition as human, particularly in the case of dance, where the mind/body relationship is the source" (Brannigan, p24). Improvisation sees the dancer, in my view, as a complex 'new media' in him or herself, aware and alive to the world from inside a human perspective. As Scott deLahunta asserts:

For some it may never have been in question, but in the context of developments in 'new media' and digital technologies, the value of material place and physical human contact is reasserting itself...as the infatuation with virtual reality and cyberspace diminishes, we will re-embrace live performance events and re-congregate in the material buildings and places which exist for them (deLahunta, <http://www.art.net/~dtz/scott3.html>).

Lived experience and Technology

The body already provides an inherently unique experience each time you move and, therefore, improvisation provides a double awareness, in that the body is dancing into an unknown as a dancing body that is already never the same. Improvisation as a process is a “making visible of contingencies or instabilities, as a fostering of differences and disagreements, as transgressions of that upon which the promise of the work itself depends and so a disruption of the move toward containment and stability” (Kaye, p23). Video-dance ‘contains’ dance in a format that can be bought and sold as a commodity that can be controlled through editing. The body in video is not ‘living’, so is it still dancing? Philip Auslander proposes that,

historically, the live is an effect of mediating technologies. Prior to the advent of those technologies (e.g., sound recording and motion pictures), there was no such thing as "live" performance, for that category has meaning only in relation to an opposing possibility (Auslander, <http://webcast.gatech.edu/papers/arch/Auslander.html>).

The terminology is now pertinent and the long life of a video-dance serves to put the relatively short-lived dancing body again, ironically, in a new place. Some would argue that technology ‘endures’ its own lived experience in that technological products like videotapes, deteriorate, and therefore ‘change’ each time they are used. I would argue that such tools are not alive and therefore cannot have ‘lived’ experience. The practice of negotiating my thoughts and words into sense patterns on the computer, however, is a physical and lived experience that inevitably informs the dance. For example, I have lately been using the analogy of ‘hyperlinks’ in relation to improvising to explain how each thought or movement affectively stimulates another hyperlink to memory, experience and response. I am affected. My argument that dance is aligned with living and breathing and, therefore, of ‘action’ has long been debated by artists such as Stelarc who is investigating technology as a site of lived experience and not just as passive information. He writes of his “Parasite-Event for invaded and involuntary body”:

Electronic space as a realm of action, rather than information. Consider a body whose awareness is extruded by surrogate robots in situations and spaces where no body could go. These machines with arrays of sensors, manipulators and hybrid locomotion would exponentially multiply the operational possibilities- scaling-up the subtlety, speed and complexity of human action. Perhaps what it means to be human is about not retaining our humanity....

(Stelarc, <http://www.merlin.com.au/parasite/paravisi.htm> {sic}).

This post-humanist stance “predicated on an ‘improved’ bodily state generated in response to external speed and control” (Phillips), further strengthens my desire to remain placed in my physical body, not in a position of fear about the ‘other’, but because of a desire to locate myself inside the danced experience. As a dancer (and as a human), I have a commitment to embody the instability of the body, not in order to control it, but to experience and respond to it as a relevant and tangible discourse through improvised dance that “bites at the heels of what is unknowable” (Monson, 1998).

Jennifer Monson is currently addressing issues of technology, lived experience and ‘liveness’ in dance improvisation, through her project *Bird Brain*, which poses the questions:

How does technology enhance the possibilities of the body and of other natural systems and where does it impede? Where are the boundaries? ... How does the body continue to orient itself and navigate distance and time in response to the constant and rapidly increasing impositions and transmutations of technology on our human systems? (Monson, 2000, www.birdbraindance.org/).

Through the project, Monson is taking her work out of the studio and across five continents over five years tracing the migratory paths of animals and loading glimpses of improvisations performed at various locations onto the Internet through her site www.birdbraindance.org/. Monson acknowledges the divide she is crossing with *BirdBrain* and is “fascinated equally by how this migratory web parallels information webs in a material, delicate, infinitely complex and changing way and this, in turn frames how I approach the body as a communication source” (Ibid). Throughout the journey, the dancers improvise through both scheduled and spontaneous performances and transpose some of these live improvised dance moments through video ‘grabs’ onto the website. ‘Captured’? Or a way to displace the containment? After all, we never know exactly where the dancers are, unless we are present at the performance site. Rather, we are privy to journal entries and thus can follow the traces of their navigational journey. “The metaphor of navigation and migration gave us the structure to interact with each environment at the same time as we moved through it, inevitably taking with us an accumulated knowledge of how, what and why we were what we were” (Ibid). A discussion of Monson as a proponent of improvised dance and its possibilities for revealing lived experience in performance are discussed in comparison to the rise of ‘techno’ bodies in Ann Cooper Albright’s “Techno Bodies: Muscling with Gender in Contemporary Dance” (1997, pp 28-56). Albright discusses Monson’s dancing in relation to the ‘burn out’ experienced by hyper-controlled ‘techno’ bodies, as “grounded in a way that can accommodate change...I can readily imagine her continuing to dance, even as her body begins to register the passage of time” (Albright 55).

On the attraction of technology and film as an artistic medium for dance, Trevor Patrick explains,

technology can offer the viewer another way of looking and the dancer another way of being in performance. It may yet harmonise and unify our being and our doing. Potentially it can uncover what is essential within a range of physical and mental activity which, in the ‘showing’, has been customarily distorted by adrenalin, sentiment and nostalgia (Patrick, p33).

I suggest that the 'adrenalin, sentiment and nostalgia' do 'distort' the showing or performance of a dancer but that this distortion is a necessary layer in the experience of live work. Further more, these 'human' 'failings' are tied up with the body, memory and personality, all which I would value as integral aspects of performance. How then is the body valued in a culture of new technology? Patrick writes that film can reveal subtle inner body imaginings that do not necessarily translate in live performance. Artists choose to represent these imaginings in a variety of ways, but this quest to reveal the inner imaginings and weight of lived experience is most central to improvisation's ongoing enquiry. I don't imply that one descends into self-indulgence in performance rather, that dance improvisation can harbor both a personal and a professional relationship to the world. My own experiments with dance and technology through two major 'multi-media' projects, *Two Heads* in 1994 and *Par Avion* in 1998, involved collaborations with dancers, cameras, television sets, projections, text, musicians, actors and an aircraft. The resulting 'productions' were full-length works that allowed me to explore different sides of 'dance'. However the actual dancing itself suffered and often became the last element to be seriously addressed precisely because it was the most adaptable. These experiences prompted me to move back to the body in order to move the dance forward. I conclude this chapter with a statement made by Yvonne Rainer prior to her transition into film in 1973 as an indisputable truism of human experience in all dance and technology genres: "My body remains the enduring reality" (Rainer, p71).

CONCLUSION

Within this discussion I have looked at improvisation in dance as a process of research in practice that is at once located, investigated, experienced and revealed in the moment of performance. With a lineage that has produced many associations and perceptions about improvised dance, my approach concurs with the current discourses advocating the body as “plural, polyvalent, mutable” (Dempster, 1988, p22), that have seen dance improvisation somewhat ironically gain acceptance as an ‘intelligent’ form of dance that reluctantly engages in its own hierarchies of practice. What has now emerged, as a dominant ideology in contemporary Australian dance practice is the very postmodern and paradoxical circumstance of ‘independent’ dance. Independent from whom, one might ask? ‘Alternative’ physical systems are now standard practice in most companies. The irony is that most ‘independent’ artists, including myself, who have trained at recognized institutions, and danced with ‘professional’ companies, are now ‘freelancing’, often producing works in tandem with a ‘collective’ of other independents. Furthermore, being independent is also not often a matter of choice as there are so few dance ‘jobs’ available. Therefore, one cannot assume that being independent is to be different from mainstream contemporary dance. In fact, I would argue that to be an independent artist *is* mainstream contemporary dance practice. This practice has spawned a number of affiliated festivals and conferences such as the *MAP Movement and Performance Symposium*, *Bodyworks*, *Antistatic*, and *Dancers are Space Eaters* that all present an ‘intelligent’ dance that is almost becoming homogenized. Dance improvisation is a visible proponent within this trend.

The current improvisational processes owe much to the proponents of Judson Dance Theatre and the Grand Union active in the 1960s and 70s, but the practice can also be defined in terms of its differences to this era. In the 2000s, dance improvisation is coming to the fore as a performance form which embraces the conventions of dance and theatre including form, presence, technique and composition, in order to map an experience of dance which has the potential to move into the unknown in a way that was rejected by the Judsonites. Dance improvisation unbalances the border between

modern and postmodern dance in its aims to develop a simultaneous awareness of both inner and outer states. With the 'doing-ness' of the postmodern experimentations, and the exploration of the inner landscape validated by the moderns, improvisational processes challenge dance to meet the reality of the world that we are currently experiencing. The history of the avant-garde in dance shows that it is the individual who instigates change but, with 'cutting edge' now a commodity, dance thrives in a culture of peer assessments and responds to a collective voice that renders the notion of the avant-garde irrelevant. Improvisation however, remains grounded in the dancer and the dance. This 'dance for dance's sake' line of inquiry is not new, with Cunningham being the obvious bastion. Dance improvisation however, is embedded in dance which is specifically *of* the dancer. Hence, the body already has a history that will inform any 'spontaneous' decision-making and this experience is given value in the context of improvised performance. As Cixoux writes "Life becomes text starting out from my body. I am already text. History, love, violence, time, work, desire inscribe it in my body" (Cixoux in Albright 1997, p104).

As a performer and choreographer I have been seduced by the potential of the new technologies and film, and seduced by the film maker. I have witnessed and experienced the challenges of today's enforced multi-skilling in artists who are their own administrators, choreographers, film makers, performers and teachers. Although for some it is a choice - for many others, it is a method of survival in dance. However, for dance (and dancers) to develop and flourish, a concentrated study moving back to the live body is necessary and most valid in this technological climate. What is happening to the dance as we head into this next millennium with the proliferation of circus-based physical theatre, film and computer generated work? These trends occupy exciting and innovative territories but is this commitment to development also occurring in the dance itself?

To enter into a live dance performance as a performer or as a viewer is to accept an unstable journey. Whether choreographed or completely improvised, the performance can never guarantee sameness because it is alive and in a permanent state of response – to itself, to the environment and to humanness. Dance is one of

the most human avenues of the arts. It is not fixed and I don't believe that it ever can be. It is alive and changing and that is what draws me into it. Through this discussion, I have attempted to go backwards into the dance to carve a way through a simultaneous experience of the past in the present moment that moves the body, the dancer and the dance forward. The *response* project that forms Part Two of my research acknowledges the accumulated responses and instability of the body as a premise to begin dancing.

PART TWO

The *response* Project: Bodies of Research

The *response* Project; Bodies of Research.

Improvisational performance promotes an active dialogue within the individual dancers, between collaborative artists and between performers and observers...Without analysing and contexting the movements, creative processes, personal practices, and artistic choices inside instantaneous composition within new frameworks, large holes will continue to exist in our understanding and appreciation of improvisational choreography and performance. These gaps have allowed both spectators and dancers to dismiss and maintain a safe distance from the communicative dialogue offered by improvisation (Elkins, p89, sic).

I was initially drawn to improvisation as a process to reconnect me with my intrinsic movement responses after working intensely on various multi-media projects and collaborations which took my attention away from my own body as the locus of dance-making. The questions that first stimulated my enquiry asked: Is it possible to create a presence in a single moving body that draws the gaze as intensely as it is drawn in the split focus new media technology driven work? Can a single dancing body communicate as swiftly or offer as great a sensory experience as multi media works? And, if improvised dance relies on both the performer and audience being 'present', and willing to stay in the experience, do dancers only perform to an informed audience and if so, what is the box office potential in a body (that presumes to *sell* nothing)? From these initial questions, I refined my point of interest back to the dancing body as a site of lived experience traceable in the immediate accumulated responses to any one moment in performance. I focussed on the potential physical embodiment of a moment as a way to access and reveal 'presence' through the accumulated responses already dense within a dancing body. Setting out to investigate improvisation as a rigorous and complex process, two main questions then stimulated my research independently and within the *response* project: What exactly do you respond to? And how are these responses manifest in performance?

Located primarily in the work of the *response* project, my research took form in the development and practice of my improvisation ensemble *response*. The *response* project is ongoing but, for the purposes of this discussion, I will limit myself to the process spanning fifteen months from March 2000 to May 2001, which incorporated three smaller projects that I have identified broadly as; ‘Project One: Developing process’, ‘Project Two: Form and practice’ and ‘Project Three: Performance practice’. This chapter is accompanied by video documentation that shows the three stages of the research – offering, in less than forty minutes, one version of a process that took place as a web of practice over fifteen months.

Commencing in March 2000, *response* Project One involved a group of fourteen dancers drawn from students and recent graduates in my improvisation class at WAAPA and one musician. This first project entailed developing a process of improvising that emphasised the articulation and practice of personal physical responses through various ‘training’ scores and tasks. The process was performed as an “In process” showing in the Music Auditorium at WAAPA.

response Project Two (July – December 2000) involved five dancers drawn from the original *response* project and focussed on maintaining a practice of performing increasingly complex and structured scores based on those first introduced in Project One. Project Two saw the beginning of an ongoing collaboration with improvisational orchestra *Ensembleu* and also included a stimulating visit by New York improviser, Jennifer Monson, who was to radically shift and challenge the direction of my research. This second stage of the *response* project was a steep learning curve that ended at a point of change and reassessment.

Project Three (March – May 2001) was redefined again as a group of five women, this time including myself. With daily practice, the development of a group work, *live*, and a solo work, *prince*, emerged and, with time invested in each dancer, I was able to further clarify my research. Throughout the process, we learnt to simultaneously discuss the dance and dance the discussion. This third stage of the *response* project culminated in a public performance season at the King St Arts

Centre and established the *response* ensemble as a presence in the wider dance community.

An over arching link throughout the project has been my continuous solo investigation and research feeding directly into the *response* work, the writing of this thesis and the performance of my solo, *prince*. The two streams of research, one independent and one collaborative, are inexorably linked but the ways of working require a different energy and focus and as a result my solo work manifested itself quite separately to the development of the *response* work. On my part, the process involved in creating and dancing solo is much like writing and imagining: ideas are present constantly and there is no way to ‘turn off’ the process since it is ongoing and not separate from myself. Working alone stimulates simultaneous thought and action and eliminates the confusion of signs and meaning inevitable among a group of people.

9/3/00 Improvisation is a way to respond
to my own unrest at what is undetermined,
to teeter on the edge of abandonment
To expand and keep expanding

10/3/00 Practicing alone is interesting in terms of performance because there is no witness. I am the recorder. I'm in this time on my own. Only I know where I am, only I can time the space, the distance, chart the journey and remember it. This story won't have an ending, won't conclude, wrap up or be discussed – it is ongoing and unwitnessed. I enjoy provoking myself. I fall into the depth of real time, talking and moving until energy, thought and focus build movement towards capturing clarity. Every movement leaves as time passes through me. Simultaneously I move through time. There goes another moment, (I watch each movement repeat in the air as a trace), I watch it turn and leave. It becomes invisible the moment it is experienced but the resonance is visible. I do the full movement – catch the weight of it – then try to watch and follow where it goes, drawing it out and stretching the elastic between transitions.

Dana Reitz, a prominent American improviser acknowledges the difficulty of verbalising dance, but insists it is necessary in negotiating expectations, intentions and a working relationship between members of a group in practice and especially in performance. She says of working with other dancers on stage that it is a “matter of trying to find out how to be individuals in that space” (Reitz in Dempster, 1991, p30). The core *response* dancers, Bec Reid, Katie Moore, Phoebe Robinson and Angie Diaz, are integral to the development of my work and the relationship between each of us has constantly shifted during the project.

13/3/00 Dialogue between two occupiers of the space. We are sharing the air, the floor,
the time and we play off each other to move into territories unspoken.
This is my playing field – come play.

Not immune to the problems inherent in a well intentioned ‘anti-hierarchy’ as the instigator of the research, I had the biggest stake in the work and, toward the very end of the process when we had achieved a degree of equality, I found I was forthcoming in my desire to maintain control. It must be said that the dancers were students and recent graduates aged between 19 and 22 years who I was training at the same time as I was dancing with them. However, the accumulated knowledge and practice that has transferred between us has nurtured a level of trust and a shared skilled base that now provides a foundation for risk taking and professional practice. As Russell Dumas says of the dancers with whom he works:

I have a vested interest in making sure they understand what my intentions are. If they don't understand they can't articulate the work, their bodies won't have the resonance that I am interested in. And yet they can't have my experiences, so it's a matter of communicating my understanding and encouraging them to find experience akin to this in their own lives (Dumas in Dempster, 1990, p14).

The *response* project is as much about the performers as it is about the work they are performing.

The desire to move in an improvisation is personal and influenced by years of accumulated experience, which you lay out to be seen. What emerges, as the point of interest is impossible to predict. It is the gap or suspension between ideas that I am interested in exposing. This space is alive with potential and possibilities for action.

The attention to what triggers or initiates movement is rich fodder for experiencing dance but it requires practice to experience these shifts in performance.

In a publicity blurb for his solo improvisation “relentlessly on”, Andrew Morrish wrote that improvisation “remains a naïve mystery despite its post-modern credentials” (Morrish). The ‘mystery’ of the unknown element in improvisation is partly what attracts me to the form - there is suspense, there is potential, and there is always the chance to choose your own ending. Thus I have been challenged by my simultaneous (naïve) desire to ‘maintain the mystery’ while exposing process.

By communicating the rigors of the practice and exposing the thought processes so that they *can* be practiced, will they be consumed as the next fad, produced in mass quantities so the specialty of the practice again gets lost, generalized, homogenized, sanitized and, horror of horror, even commercialised?

This dilemma came to fore when I was asked to write up and thereby define my ever-in-process improvisation ‘curriculum’. The process and practice of improvisation, however, is in no way invisible and the documentation of the *response* project remains eminently visible in the mountain of journal entries, floor plans, rehearsal notes, video footage, photos, program and publicity notes and most prominently in my own body and the bodies of the people with whom I danced.

I love the journey of discovery and sometimes think I am loathe to define things in case I pre-empt something else that may emerge. I at once want to reach and postpone reaching the ends of things.

Unlike the improvised dance performed by Judson Dance Theatre and the Grand Union in the 60s and 70s, I am interested in acknowledging and utilising the dance ‘training’ embedded in dancers’ bodies as an integral part of their accumulated

experience (which does not preclude pedestrian and everyday movement). The current practice of dance improvisation in performance that I have observed and experienced allows for the acknowledgement, weight and inclusion of lived experience, including 'training', when manifesting movement choices and responses - making the past, present and future integral aspects of the moment-to-moment experience. The performer responds from the frame of reference of his or her own lived experience, and it is this *awareness* that allows an insight into the experience. The *response* project is about generating ways to access this experience, not as a representation, but as a way to dance *with* the fullness of accumulated experience and responses, not despite them.

The original premise of the *response* project was based in two questions, which remain necessary points of reference: What do you respond to? How is the response manifested in performance? Through various energetic, personal, spatial, and structured scores, my intention is to uncover and harness the trained and experienced physical pathways and patterns of the body in order to form new responses to the present moment that stimulate strategic and surprising entry points into performance. By practicing the exchange of energetic states that accumulate in the body and space introduced to me by Jennifer Monson, I am attempting to provoke original improvised responses and I am aiming to train myself and other performers to view movement choices as they are made in order to become highly skilled in observing and manipulating energy shifts within a performance. Lulls in momentum become part of this process and are often valuable in informing the next response, therefore, replacing these 'dips' with covering techniques and disguises is not the pursuit. The work is live and therefore unstable. "Its story is told as a history of the body, not as danced literature" (Servos in Carter, p37).

To pinpoint exactly what I respond to is impossible as the avenue of response is in a continual state of flux. The moment I identify what *it* is, the response shifts somewhere else, even if it is in the shifting of my attention toward that response. It is a slippery definition but one that is weighted in the experience of movement. What moves me is the desire to be elastic inside my limbs, to travel stealthily under my skin, to map and reveal the plots or fantasy, thoughts, reason and experience weighting the world I inhabit

through a series of different quickfire impulses inspired by any one moment. Physically, I trust thousands of both real and imagined internal sensors and proprioceptors to puncture and investigate avenues of movement, jostling with unexpected hyperlinks to ideas, muscle-memory and meaning that surprise and trip me up into dances unplanned...subtle weight shifts in my body, a ricochet effect from the smallest of adjustments...maybe to see the length of the opposite direction and send myself hurling to the ends of that space. I respond to the audiences' response to me...to the exchange that underpins an energetic motivation to move...to being watched...and trying to watch back. A chain reaction follows a swallowing of the situation, the energy in the room, the expectation, noticing the vulnerability of the exchange and trying to open it out further to allow more choices to challenge my performance.

What triggers or inspires a response is different in every performing situation. You bring your body/mind already saturated with accumulated responses and experiences to the precipice of the immediate live moment ready to, at once, reveal and experience more. I am interested in expanding imagination, liveness, time, perception, anticipation and the quality of a moment. I experience each small death or transition as the life of a movement changes or ends, travel along an internal rhythm/dialogue/monologue, communicate with other dancers, the audience and musicians, traverse the space/mood/music, and juggle the occasional eruption of an idea or series of movements that intercept a line of seemingly unprovoked thought/dance.

I respond to a multiplicity of sources on a number of levels, compositionally and intuitively cultivating an awareness that is reflexive but aims to travel openly immersed in the moment as it unfolds...not in an esoteric kind of way but in a tangible location of energy and presence that allows people watching to chart the surprises, undercuts and developments.

Energy expended transfers to physicalised expression that is triggered in nerve impulses and articulated by contracting, extending, releasing, curling, softening, engaging, daring, hesitating, suspending, falling, catching, teasing, forcing, playing, resisting or surrendering. All of these responses are affected by the resonance already left by previous accumulated experiences of these

same articulations to be transformed, awakened or challenged
in the new moment. With meaning constantly unbalancing
meaning, the border between order and disorder
is constantly fractured and my performance
is contoured with a shifting imprint of what
I either see or don't see and absorb.

Initially with the *response* project, my desire to promote improvisation as a serious and rigorous dance practice resulted in a process that began to look like a formal 'technique' partly in response to much improvisation I had seen which "has the look of not being difficult, intellectually or physically, or clear or progressing. It kind of swims around itself and it doesn't seem to have a direction" (Reitz in Dempster, 1991, p33). For a time, the pursuit of this 'technique' served to flatten the individual responses of each dancer, while at the same time, strengthening the 'ensemble' identity. This sense of 'ensemble' was particularly heightened after experimenting with choreographed unison phrases to initiate new starting points into improvising. The energy generated immediately following the unison work resulted in improvisations which maintained an intense focus and awareness between the performers.

Interesting to pursue development of improvisation as a highly skilled technique. I saw an obvious acquiring of skills by the students in this area and witnessed them applying these skills as they improvised. It is possible.

From this discovery, I pinpointed a 'solo' and 'ensemble' score that became an underlying basis for practice and performance. By the very premise of my argument, who-ever you work with will inevitably inform and influence your own movement choices and responses. Though improvisation is not a particular style of dance, the patterns and preferences of the people you work with and dance with will become part of your own accumulated experience and individual responses.

There is a narrative and a text written on the body before it even moves.

A transference of styles, movement traits and energies eventuated between members of the *response* ensemble and proved to be both a help and a hindrance to the development of each dancer's range of responses.

Through developing process, practice and performance practice, the *response* project continuously aims to provoke ways to decipher and reveal the accumulated experience present in each dancer's body. The methods, processes, trials and discoveries are outlined in the experiences discussed in this chapter. Of course the words don't render the dancing visible but they do offer a trace of the performed experience and, together with the video documentation and the previous discussion, a window into the research process I experienced.

The process has allowed me to chart my own development as a dancer into a method I feel I can sustain in the long term. It came out of a desire to observe and give value to the process of decision making after choreographing several new works in succession that required financial and artistic reports and a tight rehearsal/creative process in the studio.



PROJECT ONE: Developing process

“...in embracing the Unexpected, there are constants: form, practice, risk, play”

(Steinman, p81).

At the outset of my research I navigated my way through various structures and working groups before formalising the *response* group. The structure of these studio investigations took place in seventeen relatively short workshop/rehearsals of between one and three hours. Developing over three months from March 9 2000 to June 15, the group included dancers, Samara Cunningham, Fuchsia Carlino, Angie Diaz, Sophie Jeffries, Kylie Hussan, Kate Middleweek, Katie Moore, Kathryn Puie, Bec Reid, Phoebe Robinson, Paul Romano, Susan Smith, Lucy Taylor, Molly Tipping, and musician Dana Ogle. I predicted that only the interested ones would stay and I would end up with a group of 6 but they all remained committed to the work, which culminated with an ‘in process’ showing.

The process involved developing dance improvisation as a rigorous practice that demands ‘rehearsal’ and attention to compositional elements, scores, and responses. In focussing on the potential of being present in each moment, we developed a series of task-based scores to generate a dynamic exchange between the individual, the group and the space. These scores were devised as ways of accessing accumulated experience through authentic movement techniques and explorations of energetic states taught to me by Jennifer Monson. Instant movement responses became the focal point of many of the scores: ‘what moves you to move?’ - mood, movement, quality, expression, music, light, sound, space, thought, energy, memory, history? I reconfigured Jennifer’s energetic states to become ‘go’ states that I used as a catalyst to stimulate instant responses.

She always had her stopwatch and an accompanying instruction to ‘go’.

This ‘go’ left a resonance within me that I aligned with the moment of instant response and a way into movement.

These 'go' states revealed that we are much more conditioned to 'stop' with the reaction time much faster and more direct than when prompted to 'go'. The instruction to 'go' is much more ambiguous and offers infinite pathways into movement. We worked to make the response to 'go' as accessible in the instant as the response to 'stop'.

Readiness present at all times with the density of
accumulated responses and experience.

Practicing responding, we began to observe energy shifts within the moving body and in relation to other bodies and the space.

As well as maintaining a commitment to respond in the moment, the suspension or gap *between* responses is the potential or *latent* energy I am interested in making transparent – the potential of the improvised performance, the simmering point, the heightened sense of awareness due to not knowing what is going to happen. I am interested in the value of a moment and its potential to reveal something that one normally might not find outside the context of an improvised situation. Choreographers manipulate this latent energy as do filmmakers, composers and soap opera writers, crafting it into a repeatable format so that the dancers, actors or musicians can remember and replay the energy. I am not suggesting that this is not an interesting pursuit as I believe improvisation is grounded in the specifics of choreography or “instant composition” as Agnes Benoit refers to it. Instead of a manifestation of latency that has been timed and decided upon prior to its performance, the quest in improvisation is to allow the manifestation of this latent period to emerge on its own terms. Not an easy task. In a sense, I am asking myself to suspend judgment of the research in the moment that I am performing it in order to not pre-empt or carve a way out of the potential too quickly.

What is actually interesting in an improvised performance, is not to know. I don't want to know and I'm continuously trying to pull the rug out from under my feet so that I can keep, for myself or for the people I dance with,

the spontaneity, this state of being in the unknown, of risk, of playfulness and of surprise (Tompkins in Benoit, p207).

Maintaining this element of surprise is a fraught proposition. How do you keep being surprised? How does one maintain an interest in one's own improvised responses? Again I believe that these skills need to be practiced, a process that is not as easy as it might first appear. The percussion that Dana contributed played a large part in defining surprises and shifts in energy and I worked to allow her to respond within her own frame of reference as well as to the dancers who she was watching.

10/3/00 Music affects energy and disperses it. Tried to gather energy from the space but found it almost impossible as it was already occupied with something else – the space was already filled (with music).

13/4/00 Day in the dark; for this Saturday rehearsal I left a note outside the studio saying Hi, please come in, start doing what you have to do, but don't talk. (Just listen). Thanks gang...not even a whisper – only on the inside." This experiment had interesting results in that it allowed people to not fill roles, stereotypes or habits expected of them by other students and themselves. The studio provided a familiar place but the darkness and silence served to bring a new quality to it that allowed new ideas to develop. Eventually as I'd hoped, people began to move and respond to the situation with a heightened awareness. A dance immersed. Feedback from the dancers: Listening to self in space, to inside noises of others, to outside sounds and activities. Liked the surprise, surprises and being surprised – allowing new patterns to disrupt familiar ones. Took opportunity to break normal patterns. Increased perception. Produced an untouchable quality.

Is it possible to keep finding surprises in your work if one takes into account our penchant for patterns and habits? On asking students if they were interested in their own short improvisations, I found answers varying from those who revelled in their own discoveries to those who were quickly bored. It is not a given to find one's own movement vocabulary or experience interesting but it is necessary in order to be able

to locate a continuously shifting point of interest when performing improvisation. Maintaining an ever-changing point of interest throughout an improvised performance is a skill that needs constant attention and, in my work, is integral in defining the dance. Locating moments of boredom or lulls in momentum are part of this process and inform the next response. Rather than trying to avoid this 'between' state, I am incorporating the gap between responses as an essential 'truth' in the performance. Aat Hougee observes that the suspension provokes: "The moment where "not knowing" gives the performers the opportunity to find new approaches" (Hougee P34). Hougee refers to this state of not knowing as "The Dip", and laments at its disappearance in the work of many European improvisers – saying that they have got so good at covering and disguising "The Dip", that perhaps spontaneity is lost a little in the performance. In my dancing, I encourage the physical thought process to emerge and be visible, thus allowing the performer access to humanness and permission to move at the edge of discovery and uncertainty.

8/6/00 – studio

A special score – I trusted myself more to follow my desire in carving the pathway – let the dancers lead me more. I feel like they really trust my scores now and I trust that they are trusting me and each other – hence we went to a very different place – one I'd like to go back to – there was a quiet concentration that became heightened when we ventured into unknown territory – mixing up the sequences and calls. Brought in other directions of space and time – more specific – the dancers moved confidently through my suggestions and were responsible for their own choices and endings. 'Hah' absolutely worked – dancers responding to the single cue in myriad ways – caused an elongated suspension in time that seemed to overlap into real time.

It had me holding my breath – I could see inside the pauses.

What drives one performer to respond to another – at what point do they change the action or support the action? Watching is vital to connecting in a group performance. Not only does one have to listen to one's own responses but also be open to the responses of others and sense your own relationship to their response. Trust is involved but also an understanding of another's particular patterns and responses.

When do you challenge or intercept the journey of another performer and what responsibility do you take on by doing this? It is immediate and tangible communication. My involvement in the process of response was connected directly with the process of the dancers and I found I was transferring my discoveries to their bodies almost instantly. I found that there was no time to let my discoveries settle in my own body. The dancers were so receptive to the process that they almost swallowed it and I had to find it for myself again and again.

Unravelling language till it loses its significance. Energy can be unreliable, tangible, economical, unstable, questionable. Gesture, purpose and context undressed, rolling and repeating deceased decisions

27/3/00 Can I tell you my story now? It doesn't have a beginning because I can't remember it. An amorphous phrase. She was whirling in water breathing through the middle parts of history, believing that time would dry her out. Another glass of wine sold to her in broken Italian/Australian. This is the context, the vastness of land, quickly crossed in aeroplanes and in memory. The air whirled past as she lay against the underside of the wing. Moving on, hidden and supported by the humming of passage, the pressure of flight, the tension in the air. Water washed the insides of my mouth, connected lines of alignment through fluids in and around my body, floating, full and sinking, repeating. Dress clings to skin, saturated, cold, instant. Silence in the thickness of fluid- elastic limbs let me dance three-dimensional. A clean sweep of waves perpetuate the aliveness of nearby death – an expansion of thought allows her to watch it happen– I abandon my self and let go of the ground, giving in to pins and needles, a thousand tiny holes puncture the moment as I seep into everywhere I've wanted to go.

Smile sinks into me illuminating the sea, the images in me transparent. The bluest colour circles inside my thighs, coating the fine hairs with fire. A sudden life of sporadic events. Sections. Divisions of a worm that live separately or as a whole. Segments are shared with others and I have a thread of our history between my legs. A film distorts my sinking and makes it appear that I am drowning. I will resurface. It's a physicality I trust and invigorate from the inside. Breath and always new beginnings.

Working solo during this initial period of *response*, I focussed on a process that allowed the weight of my own desire to prompt and cajole me into dancing. I aimed to strip my practice of the usual pressures associated with ‘rehearsing’ and focussed, instead, on a practice that retained no ‘learnt’ phrases but that accumulated and ‘remembered’ the physicality of the dancing.

10/3/00

It's nothing to do with the time generated or allocated when I'm dealing with the fullness of a moment...fulfilling a fantasy can take forever and it can take no official time. Instead it exists in an envelope in the actuality of time suspended in an unreality that is the fullest, most drenched experience. Its passion is never consumed in official time. My own time feels compressed into flesh, bones, cells – it's a choice to live twice at once, to experience the same thing in many ways, to circle inward and vocalize aloud. I think I found a way to access a particular sense of space and time in which to create and move from. It takes more focus and a complete desire to go there. Crossing boundaries to the self I located a point of beginning from being grounded. Moving inside the space and the time of right now to integrate body-mind thoughts and shifts. I feel ready. (Post script – 9/6 – I want to prolong the discoveries in order to draw them out and let the process evolve – not push it or make it fit too early).

On Thursday 15th of June, I presented my research in progress through *response*, explaining to the audience; “I am working within the framework of a 20 minute improvised score that unfolds differently each time and is dependent on focused responses by the performers. I trust and chart the process by calling directions that are often an instant response to what I see. At any given time, the performers may be in creative control of the score, working within a structured sequence or provoking me to shift, enhance or replace the action. What you see and respond to will be different every time. What the performers do at any given moment will be different each time. The intention of the process however will be maintained in terms of skill, energy and commitment. I continually shift the momentum in order to generate a heightened sense of awareness in the performer, which in turn stimulates more spontaneous and articulate movement responses. Through this I hope to accentuate, track and ultimately respond to the transference of energy that occurs between skilled

performers in a live improvised composition.” The performance ended stage one of the response project and I was surprised by the direction my work had taken. Although working with improvised responses, the structure of the performance was very directed on my part. Though not in control of the dancers particular movements or responses, I could shift and manipulate the focus and energy of the performance in terms of my own aesthetic. Still, it was risky and enlivening for both myself and the dancers but I felt ready to extend the risk into a practice that charted and directed its course from the inside of the performance.

The people in *response* are all so generous and open to learn and give back. Thank you. *Pause this moment mid movement.* Let the work develop slowly, building from memories of this time/space/experience .



PROJECT TWO: Form and practice

Realizing I needed to work more intensely with each performer to draw out an experience of accumulated responses, I established a working group of six dancers, including myself, Katie Moore, Angie Diaz, Bec Reid and Phoebe Robinson drawn from the original fourteen with the exception of American exchange student, Meagan Mazarick, who joined at this second stage. The process of selecting four from fourteen was difficult as all remained eager to continue. I had to ask myself the questions I had asked of the dancers – Who and what do I respond to? In the end it came down to a combination of gut response, personalities, potential, dance ability, commitment and with whom I wanted to dance. With the smaller group, each person became responsible for their own decisions and I was able to put *some* of my dancing self back into the process, although this project remained five ‘plus one’ until near the end.

The process developed a life of its own and became a flexible framework to support the practice. The collaboration with Amanda Jones’ improvisational orchestra *Ensembleu* also ensued. Scores began to reveal themselves from inside the dancing and we worked specifically and rigorously on locating our point of interest. “Refining intention lowers the effort required while heightening range and clarity” (Franklin, p4). Through dancing together and watching each other dance solo, we experienced two essential differences or choices in the approach of the performer when improvising and identified them as two ‘states’ a) ‘solo’, and b) ‘ensemble’. The first is an awareness of, and attention to the internal dialogue that can be developed through ‘go’ states, authentic movement and stream of consciousness work. I call this the ‘solo’ state. The second state, I call ‘ensemble’, is the reception to others in the space, focusing on a continual response to the energy and experience of other performers/bodies/histories and involves working with peripheral vision. Both states manifest themselves in numerous ways and each state can exist within the other. For example, one can move in an ‘ensemble’ state while actually dancing solo in the space and vice versa. Within these two choices are myriad possibilities for shifting between the two. By listening to one’s own body and being receptive to other bodies in the space and by identifying the difference between this internal and

external focus the body can be affected and transformed. Locating the 'shift' point between states, therefore, became another intention driving my work. If moving in response to another performer, what is it that provokes a shift back to the 'solo' state and how can this shift be expanded? There is an ensemble journey and a journey of the self that work in tandem to propel an improvised performance and I think it is the relationship of these two states that constantly changes, challenges, underlines and determines the energy of the work.

Encompassing Energy

The flow of energy or life force - chi, as it is called in eastern martial and healing arts such as T'ai chi - is the 'nourishment' of movement. Without energy, movement becomes thin and opaque, its intention diffuse. Channelling energy is a basic skill often done intuitively. Even though energy is not visible directly, its manifestation (or nonmanifestation) can be seen clearly (Franklin,p38).

Shift: 1.as a command to shift the dance, 2.as a command to stop and watch another dancer enter their own dance through your shift point 3. as a trigger to override the command. Inspired by Lisa Nelson's 'replay' and 'replace' tactics.

My interest in locating the 'shift' point between states has led me to writer/dancer Kent de Spain, whose various articles, including "Science and the Improvising mind", have further provoked my research in improvisation. De Spain has researched the implications of the quantum theory on dance improvisation and his findings are most applicable to my own work. He suggests that "at the same time in the same mind, we all have a propensity towards order and a propensity towards chaos, which creates a corresponding dualism of function." He says of improvisation that it

can be thought of as a continuous series of minute creative acts, with each action rising from the improviser's experience/physical structure and the conditions created by the improvisational choices that precede it. Quantum theory tells us that after each action there is a moment, a place, a world

where many choices for the next movement simultaneously coexist...In quantum theory, the term for this acceptable coexistence of mutually exclusive possibilities is 'a coherent superposition of states' (1994, p.59).

By researching the patterns and potential of the improvising mind, I hope to expand this moment in order to provoke new movement responses that will challenge and propel the energy of live improvised dance performance.

3/3/00 studio. Through generating or transferring energy I cultivate my responses to recharge the space and direct the fullness or emptiness of my performance.

Is focus energy? Difference when energy is dispersed or contained.

How is energy transformed in unison – what resonance does it leave?

Dynamics and all the old compositional tools come into play.

By constantly focusing on changing tasks within the improvisation, a heightened sense of awareness is generated. John Marinelli explains that improvisation is a dissipative structure as energy is constantly expended to maintain the system. The performer constantly interacts with the environment and therefore stays open to change. I am interested in pursuing another of de Spain's lines of thought about how improvisation relates to chaos theory by being a non-linear dynamical system.

That like its scientific counterpart, improvisation offers the viewer representation of chaos, the structured chaos of human beings in this case, and that through such a representation one can perceive and understand much more about the nature of the human system (De Spain, 1993, p25).

This theory to me opens up the structure of the improvising mind and, therefore, the choices reflecting back to my practice of the 'solo' and 'ensemble' states become infinitely more complex and more interesting. That patterns of unpredictability can be seen to emerge in improvisation, like in the chaos theory, is consistent with the teachings of Body Mind Centering® founder, Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen, in that improvisation reveals patterns of human systems. As Bainbridge Cohen explains "Energy vibrates and forms patterns in nature. The same patterns appear at all levels

of existence, patterns that exist in the world outside the body exist also in the world inside the body” (Cohen, 1973, p. 66). I am looking to discover these patterns within my own work by allowing them to be present in responding to immediate situations, not constructing what I think they should look like. As de Spain points, however, though no two movements are identical, “it does not mean that any movement is possible ... Genetics, personal history and the physical limitations of the human body (and the particular bodies of the dancers) are determining factors that establish a finite boundary for the infinite movement possibilities” (1993, p25/26). Again, this leads back to my practice of improvisation as accumulated responses and experience.

Finding Form; 6 5 4 3 2 1

The practice of these shifting states of awareness instigated strategies of relating to each other in performance. A structured score that was dependent on the number of dancers in the space became the driving force of our improvisational practice (and doubled as a countdown to Jennifer Monson’s visit). The dancers could enter and leave the performance space as they desired thereby triggering or ending the scores. My propensity for order in designing such a rigorous structure was due to my desire for the intention of each dancer to be clear at all times, even if it was just acknowledging that they were in an unknown score within a mutually understood structure.

6 ‘Go for gold’ grid pattern – a spatial pattern devised inside a ‘square’ inspired by the movie ‘time code’ and the Olympics! – six people in six squares and six people in one square, alternating ‘go’ states with an ‘ensemble’ awareness.

5 ‘Line’ – an ensemble dance shoulder to shoulder, taking in movements through peripheral vision and energy from the person either side of you to inspire both like and contradictory responses.

4 ‘Groove quartet’ - the familiar dance you’ve done a thousand times before, a feeling of finding your place within a piece of choreography.

3 ‘Chasing trio Triangle’ – a spatial pattern that involved one person taking the lead by moving between the other dancers, thereby changing the shape and the direction of the dance. Dancers at the base of the triangle respond or ‘flock’ the person at the tip.

2 'Solo for two people' – begins like 'line' but involves 'go' states, harmonising, responding and replacing.

1 Solo - Expanding the shift point and allowing time to locate the point of interest in the unknown.

2/9/00 Need to practice improv between us now. Will lose sense of structure for a moment, for a few hours (too many tasks) I think they can choose and follow own decisions, open it up now, watch it happen. Working on listening, watching, difference between moving in 'go' and moving in relationship to others through peripheral vision.

The collaboration with improvisational orchestra *Ensembleu* confirmed the 6,5,4,3,2,1 structure as Amanda Jones worked with the band members on defining their own responses to each specific score. The relationship between the dancers and musicians became increasingly responsive throughout the process.

rebound around surround self with timed minutes of catching someone else's breath in an overbalance

Breaking the score

By the end of project two, the *response* ensemble had arrived at a clear and structured process with which we were comfortable and accomplished in practicing. The arrival of Jennifer Monson in November 2000 tipped the balance of the practice we had established and provoked new ways into my research. After observing several improvised versions of the scores in practice, Jennifer suggested that the work was very much a process, and a way of working. Her feedback acknowledged the beauty and validity of the process, but stressed that it was exactly that, a process not performance. Her feedback was direct and on the day we spent working together with *response* and *Ensembleu*, she tripped up the process and opened it out to reveal new access points into performance. She noted that the process limited the performers' choices within the spatial structures: "it seems like you're only allowed

to relate to each other spatially and compositionally - responding can be contradictory” and she emphasised the need for “five original views of the world”. With a new understanding of scores as structures that are there to be broken, we prised open the process and travelled to a new place. We addressed the problem of breaking patterns by acknowledging them and sticking closely to them as valid perspectives to develop in order for change to emerge unforced. Each movement demands and drives its own particular use of space and we aimed to be attentive and aware of how movement changes and what that movement needs in terms of space. During several performed scores, we dropped the *response* score and let the process just ‘fall’ in. Rosalind Crisp talks about the changing relationship to scores in performance explaining that, though she rehearses the scores beforehand, “I know once I enter that space I’m not going to give myself any instructions...the event actually takes place in relation to loosening the instructing” (Crisp, p38).

distracted, dislocated, exhausted, isolated, unsettled, a resistant learning curve – clouded my clarity- get to places where murky leads back to cool water. Need to be more specific in tasks to bring people out. Take you to a place you didn’t expect. Help them make their solo – emotional or physical score – reinterpret scores. Improvisation is about making scores that you can be free in. Try performing 24 hours or outside to break it up. Un-aestheticise it.

Jennifer’s visit also carved a way into the making of my solo, *prince*. We worked together for a week using authentic movement techniques, ideas of navigating the space inside and outside of the body and deciphering energetic, emotional and spatial points of interest into the dance. Jennifer’s phrases in response to my dancing included: *An old lady’s hands holding something for a long time, an island creeping towards shore, a wooden raft floating- someone’s life preserver ...mirrored arms and legs, a soft twirl in a slow circle, hold a gulp of water...The little royal prince. Awkward rhythmic reptile. Virginia Woolf novel, light, descriptive of space, contemplative, time, emotion. Score - Old/young, fear/bravery.*

27/11/00 What I want is infinite and unachievable. Feel incredibly inspired to dance in my body- finding a way in and away to open it out. Feels great. Feels tangible, feels real. Envelope the shifts in circles, smooth around the road/way into you, surveillance of the inside, spaces in osmosis with the external thickness of air smothered with experience and timelessness. Sink in time, drop in on yourself, look around, stay awhile, stay longer than expected, stay the night and see what it's like in the dark.

Rest on fleshy walls, sing and slide down bones to move
in instant suppleness, sound booming.

19/09/00 Enjoying the developing work with *response*...slowly uncovering the elements that interest me...namely the shift in energy between dancing on 'go' and dancing within the periphery of the group 'line'.

Throughout this project, *response* developed as an ensemble and with Jennifer Monson's visit, I was able to carve a way back into the group as a dancer. After the initial shake up of her visit, I eventually felt re-empowered about my research and recognised that the differences in our points of view and interest in improvisation were integral in defining and developing my own approach to process, practice and performance.



PROJECT THREE: Performance Practice

“Breath is like water – it can’t be pushed but if you open space for it, it will rush to fill in this space” (Karczag, 1995/96a, p 37).

Is it possible
to swallow maps like words
like experience?
To charge depth and breadth and width into
soul, thought, skin?
Show me.

Challenging my own perceptions, rigorous, small battles with myself...a winding path, distractions and re focus – like Jane Armstrong said – ‘the point where the world moves’...your position changes...expand that space.

After a year of charting progress and process, I felt urgently that *response* was ready to swallow the dance map we had charted and to reconnect with the wider dance community through performance. With five dancers and five weeks, the process was an intense window of research that resulted in huge developments, disasters, revelations and a surprising steadiness of practice. The five week creative process can be identified in two parts; Firstly, by dropping the original scores and collapsing the structures, we re-asked the questions ‘what do you respond to and how is the response manifested?’ through applying attention to endings, beginnings, arriving, formal space, timing and the life of a movement response. Secondly, we acknowledged and practiced the accumulation of experience over time as a strategy to inform and frame responses in performance. In the words of Anna Halprin:

We began to explore systems that would knock out cause and effect...We began to deal with ourselves as people, not dancers...It wasn’t so much repeating patterns, it was a repetition of similar attitudes that didn’t lead to any further growth (79). I began to feel that we had paid such strict attention to self-awareness, kinaesthetic response, and each other, that we

developed a stifling introspection. So we began to extend our focus to adaptive responses in the environment (Halprin in Rainer, 1995, p81).

Settling the ensemble

Following Monson's visit, the *response* group came back together at a new starting point. In the three-month break from the ensemble, I continued working with Jennifer in Melbourne then returned to Perth to absorb the criticisms and responses and pave a way back into the process with a huge desire to dance in the imprints of the experience.

And with Jennifer's performance opening tonight– I closed. Cut the tie left in the wake of my hero gone. The tenth day away and the little prince has retreated to his planet leaving a flower and only good wishes. Waiting. Orbiting.
30/11/00 – In December the little prince came home. waited in the wind for the silence to descend between crumple fingertips. and pulled the weeds away from the flowers.
Let the colours breath s/he sighed. let the seeds settle in naked beds and call the birds back.

Back in the studio with the dancers, I began by asking 'what moves you to move?' Talking of beginnings led to discussions about endings and we worked on scores of settling and being present.

How is it different to rehearsing for a show? What are you 'working' on in a choreographed work? (shape, phrasing, timing, etc) What then do you work on when you don't know what it is until you are in it, doing it?
Sometimes it's the same.

An idea for a floor phrase that begins in unison and leads to improvised repercussions. Like the paper, scissors, stone, hand game.

Week 2 saw the ensemble unbalance and teeter with the news that Katie's knee was to be operated on next week. With so much invested in each dancer, it was fairly

tragic news for the *response* project, but I tried to maintain the focus on the ongoing project and emphasised that the show is not the be all and end all. However, the process changed and was challenged again and, though Katie was present, I still missed her in performance. By the third week, the dancers were finding the going tough. I pushed them, especially Phoebe through her inclination to stop at an 'end' point, in order for another choice and layer to emerge by remaining in the space to begin again. We worked on beginning, becoming, settling, arriving, ending, leaving, space/time, solo/ensemble and on the impulse or desire to move/leave.

Bec's big question for this week. How do you follow the rules of a game that essentially has none? Jo asks that we know where we are in each moment to moment. Even if we don't know where we are – know that! There in the body finds itself. Remembering the luxury of working on 'my' dance (Bec Reid).

When Angie came back into the process after her involvement in the student production the process took some adjusting again.

I had missed quite a lot of the process which showed and I felt it. The transformation or perhaps the distance that Jo, Phoebe and Bec had gone and found was incredible, while all maintaining their unique qualities they were very much a unit. There was an indefinable ease in which they entered the space. Different scores had emerged, different dancing, informed presence (14/5/01 Angie Diaz).

By week four, we were ready to swallow the map and dance it from the inside out, initiating scores as well as responding. As Libby Dempster notes, the eyes are active as well as receptive (Dempster, 2000). Responding is therefore not a passive experience. The space in front of and behind the eyes became a point of interest and we worked on scores to inhabit the space we were in through acknowledging the space that inhabits us.

Responses:

8/5/01 Experience of the simultaneousness of me in the space and the space in me. A thousand existing and ongoing processes of the body- interacting, collaborating, experiencing. What impressions are left on the body, into and of the space? The space maintains our aliveness and is an actual part of our physicality, without it, we die. A feeling of fullness, filling and emptying, becoming and undoing and becoming (becoming undone) it is by acknowledging these processes we bring ourselves home.

–skin like surface of water – 2 realities meeting each other – like you could plunge through either way – and inbetweenness like a camera that sees both under and over the surface of water. Space as a part of the body is a concept you understand but not one you automatically experience. Put your eye into other parts of your body. Inner and outer kinaesphere, only so much you can give importance or concentration to. Realization of space as like another organ – vital, less isolated in your soul – more connected (Phoebe Robinson).

refreshing to experience space coming into the body – pick pockets of air pushing space apart, always changing (Bec Reid).

We investigated the complexity of unravelling the *life* of a movement asking: What is the life of a movement or phrase? What is its resonance or echo? How *long* does a movement go for? In letting go of a previous state – where does it go *to*? You can't help inevitable accumulation; even the smallest shift can inspire the most radical hyperlink in the brain.

Scores of development and undercutting development (Richard Foreman) Phoebe thinks that in developing one idea it becomes three dimensional – development makes thought process slow down, undercutting makes it speed up – Molly thinks the opposite – constant undercutting jams thought process with too many impulses – want your thought process to be open in order to find clarity.

Accumulated/stored/saturated

The lives of ours that press in on us must be heard. We are our own oral history. A living memoir of time. Time is downloaded into our bodies. We contain it. Not only time past and time future but time without end. We think of ourselves as close and finite when we are multiple and infinite (Winterson, p103).

Through locating specific, though constantly shifting, points of interest in an improvisation, I became interested in what this sense of ‘interest’ created in itself – adding another layer to the accumulated presence of the performer. What has been accumulated from the *response* scores and what is at the fore of an improvised investigation? I am interested in what scores and accumulations will come to the fore on the day of performance. The most recent score we experienced, the most practiced or the very first ones we devised? I asked that the dancers constantly know what score they are in or *not* in to remain ‘awake’ to the shifts in the performance. Cath Stewart came in to rehearsal on several occasions and, influenced by her work of Russell Dumas, suggested we did not have to dance *all* of ourselves *all* of the time – simply let people watch the dancing. Each individual or the ensemble *can* repeat things, bring attention to something, shift and maybe go back to it or reference it later.

I speak in terms of accumulation...but what was actually retained, accumulated? Hard to find markers to measure the performance by...too subjective, personal, critical. How much is retained? Is that the idea anyway? Bodies before me opening up to inspire change and challenge my ideas and choices. Everybody as a house of a thousand accumulations all at your access, all distinguished, all of interest. I am interested. Self as source material.

We move hoping to be guided by total, complete sensory awareness. Feel and respond. Listening to the cellular chain reaction that then propels the body into awareness. We are alive through a collection of input and output happenings of the body. And in each moment we ask ourselves to be present.

That is all. That is the whole. A package. Full, autonomous, trustworthy and yet an unpredictable wildcard (Bec Reid).

March 17, 2001 The Little Prince solo. Strange to be embarking on this solo adventure – seems necessary in order to feed back the **response** work into my body. In a way I feel it will help me to experience really being inside the work without worrying about the choices of the other dancers. I met with Michael O'Brien who is designing the sound- around 12 minutes I suggested. I am working with him to encourage a soundtrack that, even though it will remain the same, evokes an idea that it is different each time, playing with time signatures, pauses etc. I am interested in the way sound will become part of the space for my dance. I don't feel it will tie me into any kind of repetition – in fact I think the recall of the music will allow me more choices within my own journey as my responses will be different each performance – sometimes affected and other times not. I envisage a reference to a coat of armour as costume.

Ensembleu

The collaborative relationship with ***Ensembleu*** developed during the performance process and is worthy of discussion at great length. However, due to the enormous amount of information and the specifics of my topic, I will say here only that the scores and dialogue were forged live with each performance between the musicians, the dancers and the audience. We have since continued to challenge and extend the collaboration.

27/5/01

Write 1000 dances around
 days of process and tension
 in the green room
 listen past layers of doubt
 trust me I want to trust you
 unstable why can't you read me
 open the physicality to listen immediately

hearing options turn into movements
 live in the space of self to see into watchers
 gaze though thickness and crossed arms
 twitching expectation
 surrender into action
 prince

5/01 I watch the group now and it's hard to dance into my own company. It is hard to be watched today. They excite me, fill me with what I am always looking for. The choices and the stillnesses in each one of them make me smile. It's a spirit, a vulnerableness. It draws me ever in. The desire to sit in the wait, in the in between. The unknown.
 The surprise when something grows, lives, finds a life,
 a series of new choices.

The accumulated responses that came to the fore during this last stage of the *response* project centred on those scores which explored a spatial and energetic connection between the performers, dancers and musicians. The idea of 'knowing' at all times what you are doing – even if it was knowing that you *don't* know what you are doing, was a specific focus that allowed us to remain in the experience of the 'doing' and made room for what we termed the 'unknown' element or score to arise. The possibility to 'end' an idea or response, allowed for the 'dip' or suspension to be present in performance, and these 'glitches' in momentum became valuable openings for new possibilities. The video shows an example of this in project three where all the dancers leave the performance space and a new beginning is negotiated.

Doubt and the administration of performance

The usual trappings of presentation seem incongruous in this context but they exist and are demanding of my time. Costumes – why? The issue of costumes emerged when thinking about what we would wear in performance. Practice clothes? Too seventies. A 'random' choice of costume each night? Too subjective. My theory was, that whatever we wore in performance would affect the viewing of the dance, and even if we had 'randomly' chosen clothes to wear ourselves each night, this

would have had an extraneous impact on the dance. I decided a 'known' element was best in that it would distract (us) the least from the 'doing' that we were performing. Inspired to work with Designer Genevieve Dugard after seeing her design for the WAAPA production of "Abode of the Vacancy", directed by Neil Gladwyn, I felt that, with her outside perspective, her design would add a layer that would not be incongruous to the performance.

Do the costumes look like star trek outfits? Do they impose a narrative
or theme when I'm trying to exist without one?

I want the design of the costumes and performance space to lay down a symmetrical base for the work to arrive in. Andrew Lake suggests the use of tape and seating to give structure to something which appears not to have one, through marking a defining performance area with four entrance and exit corners. It is interesting to note how having one constant lighting state contributes to a morphing effect. There are no clear shifts because of lights and 'wash' effects. The dancers have to assert the clarity in the space themselves by marking endings/beginnings/shifts – a challenge.

I describe these necessary production elements like having a frame ready and knowing what, when and where you will take the photo but not having actually taken the photo yet.

I feel strongly that whatever we wear would be suggestive of something. Even if, (especially if), we were nude. They do have a sort of Zen, clear quality that I like. The only element improvised is the actual live human performers like a soccer match (they practice scores that may or may not eventuate) know what time/location its going to happen but you don't know the outcome (trained in variations)

Like setting up traditional performance structure and putting trained
performers into the known situation who then performs in the live,
not pre-recorded moment. (memory?)
last minute doubts.

20/5/01

complete panic and exhaustion.

Highly strung about the work.

The not knowingness, the risk

The performance /Response to *response*

The performances worked in terms of the improvisational experience, with each performance different (from the inside), though it is hard to find markers to effectively measure the differences. Interesting themes eventuated with the use of space widening each night. Phoebe noticed that she seemed to pick one corner and use it almost all night to enter and exit. In her own words, she “spent a fair bit of time dancing about the edges”, noting that sometimes her “best decisions were choosing ‘not’ to go on.” Phoebe’s dancing has a sense of timing and perception I really enjoy. The fact of spending so much energy and attention on the dancers revealed itself in my performance with them. Moreover, though I think my ways of seeing them has opened up the way I see myself.

In performance the group work has been harder to let go of...it is still evolving so much and still in the stages of finding the ‘dancer in the dancers’ that it is hard to judge or relax.

Too many cringe points and reverting back to old habits and performance patterns, contact duets, predictable conversations with the musicians. But too harsh – the dancers are all moving beautifully and maybe there is too much of the need to ‘save’ from me. Sometimes I feel like I need to jump in and wake them up –WHAT ARE YOU DOING? What do you see – be specific, I expect a lot, we have been working a lot, it is very full on, they are working desperately hard but they can afford to just be.

Throughout the process, I had chosen to remain removed from the usual markers or traditional feedback to ‘improve’ the performance in order to resist imposing my own aesthetic preferences. However, this decision became more difficult to uphold during the actual performance season. On the third night, I received ‘traditional’ feedback just before I performed my solo, which catapulted me back into a dance world and my performance became confused with trying to fulfil traditional expectations.

Prince. Journal entry - Saturday May 26th 2001, after midnight

Tonight felt very vulnerable, definitely felt the vastness of the space I was in ... felt flat, felt serious. Tonight I felt bare, like I didn't have answers or even a clear journey, it felt repetitive, like a searching instead of just being. Some felt it had more space, was beautiful, had more weight (wait). I felt less in my body, more conscious of what I was doing and why, I felt like I had to explain something, that I was trying to answer their queries. It was harder work, it wasn't as much fun as the first two shows and I couldn't work out why. The energy of the audience in the room was extraordinarily loud. I quickly worked out the light or supportive areas – a girl in a blue top in the corner where Franc was filming became a pivot point. She received what I had to give and said as much after the show.

Tonight I was more afraid to look out, I felt the weight of expectation of puzzlement, almost that I was a disappointment and I was disappointed, mainly that I felt I hadn't begun when it was time to leave. I was there at the end. I didn't want to leave, if I had known the CD would end and not go onto the next track, I might have re-entered the space and kept dancing. I might not have stopped till I found 'it' again, maybe it was a good lesson
 - Drop into the moment as it really does go so quickly,
 "Performance's only life is in the present." (Phelan, 1993, p146).

When, on the second night, the performance ended with Mace on the guitar at an unexpected point, it reinforced the experiment. The audience spontaneously clapped and I loved that the dance found its own end. At times I was, perhaps, too desperate to shift things. I probably needed to listen more too. Always the interceptor, the caretaker roles took over and I found that I couldn't just respond, didn't trust it enough. But in this state, new things happened too. I entered the silver taped area and sat in a chair, as did Phoebe also, which blurred the lines between watchers and watched. Audience members spoke of the way the 'performance 'began' *before* we entered the space, with audience members 'responding' to each other across the room - establishing a response before the show.

Prince. Journal entry continued

Very intense couple of nights...last night, very stressed, strange lack of support or the solo-ness of the solo and the preparation for it...I fed off the tension and performed full on, flat out so focused and open that perhaps I was not all there. Last night I definitely

felt the Jennifer Monson experience shine in my dancing, I enjoyed it, enjoyed the eyes of my first years, felt dense with choices, desire, history. The first night solo was great amounts of fun, truly the most rewarding and thorough dance experience I have ever had. (smile) It is amazing that the energy of the watchers can so much fuel the work and my responses.

It felt like I danced everything and offered it to them as a take it or leave it viewing experience- no strings attached.

Second night I was truly 'amped' and it came out in my dancing which I also enjoyed, furious fire and bows and arrows shot by the little prince at the world through armour and open eyes.

One must take a chance on the fitness of one's own instincts...it's not enough to know something once; you have to know it all over again in a different context. In the improvisation, at the moment of moving into an action; one must behave and feel as if no other choice exists even while running the risk of acting out a thoroughly private illusion – incomprehensible to anyone looking on. Regret reveals itself instantly and undermines whatever is happening on top of it. Regret garrottes the imagination. I like that. I'll say it again. Regret garrottes the imagination. The Spaniards used the garrotte to choke people to death (Rainer,1974, p299).

CONCLUSION

The *response* project both affirmed and challenged my assertions of the body as a site of accumulated responses accessible in the moment of performance. The project generated a process that determined how these responses were practiced and revealed and, as a result, became *a* specific way of working with the potential of dance improvisation. However, some of the concepts devised in the process can be extended to other ways of working in dance, whether improvised or not. For example, because the focus was on developing the individual responses of the dancers, they inevitably became more sensitive and articulate performers in general. In my own dancing, the process reconfirmed my experience of dance as an art form that is inextricably linked to the dancer. As it says in the *response* program: "The life of each performance is invested and located in the bodies and choices of the performers."

How much of the performers' lives and experiences were located in the performance however is another matter. Because the process demanded that a heightened state of awareness be maintained, my concern is that the dancers were so focussed on engaging these *response* systems of improvisation, that the potential for movement manifested itself in only one specific relationship to dancing with accumulated experience, when there are many relationships to be forged. These complex systems, though perhaps limiting did, at the same time, produce a presence in the performers which resonated as an energetic exchange between the performers, the space and the audience.

Working with the same dancers over a period of time resulted in shared accumulated experiences within these systems that allowed for the potential of ironic and parodied responses to emerge which referred to, challenged or departed from the known scores. As David Zambrano suggests: "Every part of the working process is possible to perform as long as you are aware of what you are doing at that moment in relationship to your surroundings" (Zambrano in Zambrano, Tompkins, & Nelson, p.30). With this as the underlying premise for responding in performance, he adds:

“Now the question is: How can we bring out all the life experience into the *now* and use it? (Ibid, p31). With further development of the process and more time with the same dancers, I would attempt to go further in unravelling the particular processes of each performer. Moreover, I believe that a valuable experiment would be to apply the same process of revealing accumulated responses with a group of more experienced dancers.

7/10/ 2000 Strange to want to start so many books. New space for new recordings?

Unburdened with the past. unwritten as yet with any possible ending, any possible beginning. Same in the studio. I always begin again. Particularly with response –

I don't continue on the theme rather I record a collection of findings in their own right and now am loathe to connect the dots.

A billion unturned stones draw me ever in.

12/2001 I now see this desire for new beginnings as starting from a body already full of uncountable new beginnings

Dancers performing choreographed works can develop a precise and fulfilling sensitivity toward movement once it is known and ‘stored’ in the body so that one can forget the ‘remembering’ of the ‘steps’ and ‘commit’ oneself fully to the moment. I believe that an improviser, with a cultivated awareness of the experience stored in the body, can achieve the same sensitivity toward each movement despite performing it for the first time. The dancer who is improvising is acutely sensitive both to the moment and to the physical movement responses that are being performed in that moment.

Dance improvisation applies immediate feedback received in the experience of performance to generate live movement responses. To receive this feedback requires a particular kind of attention that perhaps results in the similarity of experience that Lisa Nelson describes.

For me, my experience of looking at most improvised performances – the anthropology of it, the bigger picture of what it is as performance, and what it can offer me to learn about magic, which is always compelling to me – is

almost always the same, and I wonder about this... (Nelson in Zambrano, Tompkins & Nelson, p33).

That a 'style' of sorts emerged from my intention to draw out the differences in individual responses through *response* is ironic, but in the face of my argument for accumulated experiences, hardly surprising. An area that I would like to further explore is the possibility of re-performing improvised works where the idea of accumulating a 'repertoire of the known/unknown' is possible. The intentions that connected me with my solo work, *prince*, revealed traces of accumulated responses that I believe would only continue to develop with multiple experiences of performing the 'same but different' work. The *response* project however, remains an ongoing process, as does my solo practice.

the truth of the character is in the present moment: immediate, precise, ephemeral and poignant.... Tomorrow, he will have changed his mind, his heart, his truth and he will say something else (Cixous in Sellers, p86).

What? What?
Wisely
A few twigs were left
For the old
To throw into the fire

I would visit all the places I have left
Then I would know myself differently

Bank the fires

(Forti, 1974, p108).



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Conversation and dance dialogue with:

Jennifer Monson, Dr Maggi Phillips, Cath Stewart, Amanda Jones, Lindon Thompson, the 1st year WAAPA dance students (2001) and the numerous artists who participated in the *response* project, particularly, Bec Reid, Katie Moore, Angie Diaz and Phoebe Robinson.

APPENDIX

The *response* project video accompanies Part Two of this thesis.

Documenting the three stages of the practical research in progress, the video offers, in less than forty minutes, one version of a process that took place as a web of practice over fifteen months.

I also include the program that accompanied the performance season of *response*.



Live improvised dance performance directed by Jo Pollitt

May 24 - 27 2001 King Street Arts Centre

response

MTL
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1997
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Response maintains the dancing body as its point of focus and investigates the potential energy that is apparent in the responses, interactions and decisions of a live improvising performer.

The Response project is an ongoing process that affirms the role of the dancer as an authority in revealing patterns and traces of lived experience, knowledge and ideas. These bodily inscriptions form the seminal grounds for the physical and energetic exchange of improvised dance in performance.

The Response work forms the practical component of an MA in Creative Arts, which will be accompanied by a thesis titled 'Accumulative Response in Improvised Dance Performance' due for completion this year.

Little Prince

Performed by Jo Pollitt

Sound design by Michael O'Brien.

Costume design Genevieve Dugard.

Conceptualized in December 2000 during a visit by Jennifer Monson, the solo applies attention to immediate feedback experienced in the moment of performance as a catalyst to a series of improvised responses.

Live

Performed by Jo Pollitt, Phoebe Robinson, Bec Reid, Katie Moore & Angie Diaz.

Live sound by Ensembleu.

Costume design Genevieve Dugard.

Lighting advisor Andrew Lake.

Initially derived from a series of highly complex structured scores, Live is performed as an open score driven by the performers physical responses to the space and each other. The life of each performance is invested and located in the bodies and choices of the performers. The interactions that result are unedited but discerning and driven by a heightened (and practiced) state of awareness. Actively watching and responding, the performers simultaneously affect and are affected by the development of the work.

Response

Response is an improvisational dance ensemble that began in March 2000 with 14 dancers and musician Dana Ogle. From the original project I invited four dancers to further develop the research and several periods of creative development have since ensued. Working with scores of energy, attention, interest and space through a sustained and rigorous practice, the process was fuelled by the presence of New York artist Jennifer Monson during her residency with Response in 2000.

Through this research I am interested in treating the body as a complex new media in itself and in developing a creative process that constantly refines and redefines itself. It is a window of change in my own aesthetic and interest in dance from which new entrance points into the improvisation and choreographic process have emerged.

Jo Pollitt

Jo received her BA in Dance from WAAPA in 1993 and has since worked with companies including Tasdance, 2 Dance Plus (now Buzz Dance Theatre), Two Turns and Terrapin Theatre.

Independently, Jo has created several dance and multi-media works including One and Par Avion and was the Co-director of the 1999 Hobart Fringe Festival. Six months of professional development in Sydney and New York in 1999 inspired her current postgraduate research into improvisation as a performance practice which is now an ongoing pursuit through her improvisational dance ensemble Response.

Bec Reid

Bec completed her BA in Dance at WAAPA in 2000 after four years with Stompin' Youth Dance Co. Bec was the assistant to the choreographer on a dance film directed by Tracie Mitchell and has since formed Jerry n Margret's Lil' Film Company with visual artist, Richard Munsie.

Recently returned from Tasmania, Bec was an associate choreographer on Placement for the Ten Days on the Island festival. Later this year Bec will travel to India on the Gilgamesh project with Daksha Seth. The opportunity to work with Jo Pollitt and Response has fuelled Becs' interest in improvisation and her ongoing love for dance.

Phoebe Robinson

Phoebe trained at the WAAPA under dance luminaries Lucette Aldous, Nanette Hassall, Sue Peacock and Neil Adams. She completed the Advanced Diploma in Performing Arts in 1999 and in the same year performed in Tara Bollard's Sharkey's Day 2. In 2000, she performed in Neil Adams Triptych, Tara Bollard's An Indication Of..., Sophie Jeffries' Dislocation, and premiered her own choreography for Putting On An Act.

This year she choreographed Transitions for the Perth Fringe Festival and acted for Jerry n Margret's Lil' Film Company. Phoebe continues to work with Response.

Katie Moore

Katie graduated from the Queensland Dance School of Excellence in 1996, then completed a BA in Dance at WAAPA in 2000. She is currently completing an Honours degree researching text and dance. Katie has worked with choreographers including Sue Peacock, Nanette Hassall and Diane Reid and choreographed works for student dance seasons.

This year she has been invited to perform with Diane Reid in Melbourne and will undertake several company secondments. She will also travel to India on the Gigamesh project with Daksha Seth. Katie has been a member of Response since March 2000.

Angie Diaz

Angie was raised in Darwin, and first began dancing Latin and Ballroom styles. At the age of eight, she had competed on a National and International level and went on to continue her dance studies at WAAPA focusing on contemporary dance and performance.

During her time at the Academy, she has worked with choreographers including Reyes de Lara, Nanette Hassall, Derek Kreckler and Brett Daffy. Angie is a founding member of Response and hopes to continue developing her skills in improvisation and performance.

Ensembleu

Ensembleu is an improvisational music ensemble lead by Amanda Jones.

Mace Francis has been involved in many music styles for the last seven years. From punk rock through to jazz, funk, Latin and free improvisation. He finds the challenge of new musical settings exciting. This current project is no exception.

Michael Wallace started playing violin at an early age before taking up clarinet and then saxophone. He has played in a symphony orchestra, a concert band, several big bands and small jazz groups. Michael is currently completing his final year at WAAPA, studying composition and arranging.

Shane Kelly is in his final year of composition and arranging at WAAPA. He plays in a piano trio called 'Sobriquette' and his principal instruments are piano and double bass.

Michael O'Brien

Michael is an artistic sound designer who has created audio scapes and effects for theatre, dance and film productions. He is currently completing his final year of Sound Production and Design at WAAPA.

Genevieve Dugard

Genevieve is a designer currently completing her final year at WAAPA. She has worked with Buzz Dance Theatre and various theatre companies.

Acknowledgments

Many, many thanks to Franc Raschella, Jennifer Monson, Dr Maggi Phillips, Nanette Hassall, Dr Neville Weston, Cath Stewart, Amanda Jones and Ensembleu, Lindon Thompson, Paige Gordon, Molly Tipping, Emma, Agnes, Dee and Rod, the Dance Research Center, graphic designer Bim Ricketson, Gen Dugard, Michael O'Brien, Andrew Lake, Megan Mazarick. Dana Ogle, the original Response group and Bec, Katie, Angie and Phoebe who have danced with me always at the beginning and always becoming.

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