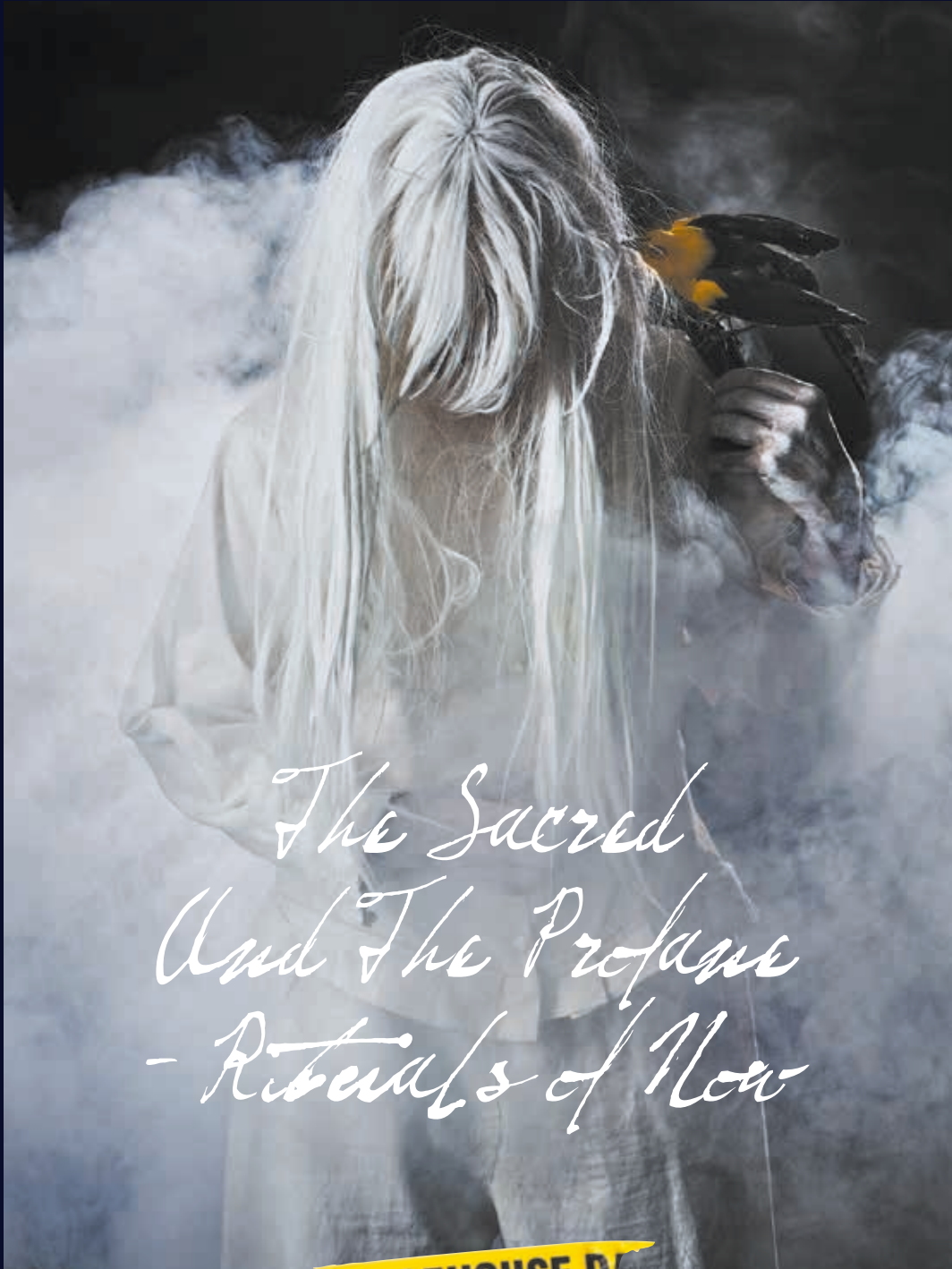


# DANCEHOUSE DIARY

ISSUE 7 / 2014



*The Sacred  
And The Profane  
- Rituals of Now*

**DANCEHOUSE D**

## Dancehouse Diary Issue 7 / 2014

PG. 3

In Praise of Rituals

PG. 4

Watching Dance – Rituals  
of Spectatorship

PG. 6

Ritual and Shamanism  
within (performance) Art

PG. 9

Contemporary Dance and  
its Rituals

PG. 12

Diary Entries

PG. 14

Shared Vision

PG. 16

Music as a Space of  
Possibilities

PG. 19

Riyaz

PG. 20

Ritual Cultural Policy

PG. 21

Conversation with Tere  
O'Connor

## Contributors

Ben Eltham, Shruti Gosh, Alice Heyward, Deborah Jowitt, Betty Lefèvre, Linda Luke, Anne Marsh, Sarah-Jane Norman, Tere O'Connor, John Rundell, Yumi Umimare, Soo Yeun You.

## Editorial Board

**Philipa Rothfield** (Chair) is an Honorary Senior Lecturer in the Philosophy program, La Trobe University. She is a dance reviewer for RealTime arts magazine and Momm magazine, Korea. She is co-convenor of the Choreography and Corporeality working group, International Federation of Theatre Research. She has been dancing on and off for some decades. As a philosopher, she writes on French philosophy, political philosophy, feminism and postmodernism, specialising in philosophy of the body. She is currently writing a book on dance and philosophy. She has published on dance in relation to Merleau-Ponty, Whitehead, Nietzsche, Klossowski and Ravaissou. She is also Dancehouse's 2014 Creative Advisor.

**John Rundell** - Associate Professor John Rundell is Reader in Social Theory and Director of The Ashworth Program for Social Theory at The University of Melbourne. He is an editor of the journal *Critical Horizons* and of the *Social and Critical Theory Book Series*. He has published widely on the topic of modernity, and problems of human self-images in social theory, with particular reference to the imagination. Recent publications include *Aesthetics and Modernity Essays by Agnes Heller* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2010); *The Erotic Imaginary, Autonomy and Modernity* in Harry Blatterer, Pauline Johnson, and Maria Markus, *Private Intimacies*, 2010, London, Palgrave MacMillan; 'Re- reading Fichte's *Science of Knowledge* after Castoriadis: the anthropological imagination and the radical imaginary', *Thesis Eleven*, No. 119, 2013. [maneyonline.com/loi/crit](http://maneyonline.com/loi/crit) [www.brill.nl/publications/social-and-critical-theory](http://www.brill.nl/publications/social-and-critical-theory)

Cover images by Jill Orr.

**Jill Orr** has delighted, shocked and moved audiences through her performance installations which she has presented in cities such as Paris, Beijing, Hong Kong, Amsterdam, Antwerp, New York, Toronto, Quebec City, Graz, Hong Kong, Sydney, Melbourne, Adelaide and Brisbane from the late 1970s to now. Orr's early iconic work *Bleeding Trees* has led to commissions such as *Marriage of the Bride to Art*, *Raising the Spirits*, *Exhume the Grave*, *Hunger*, *The Myer Windows*, *The Sleep of Reason Produces Monsters*, *Goya and Ash*, to which have contributed immensely to the contemporary cultural landscape. [jillorr.com](http://jillorr.com)

**Angela Conquet** is Artistic Director of Dancehouse and founder of this publication. She has worked extensively in the independent dance sector as artistic director, presenter and producer and her work experiences took her to different contexts and countries. She is also a translator and interpreter.

*Dancehouse would like to warmly thank all the contributors to this issue and particularly John Rundell and Chloe Chignell. Many thanks to Modjtaba Sadria and Sally Gardner. A huge thanks to Jill Orr for allowing us to use her artworks for the Diary covers.*

## What is Dancehouse Diary?

THE DANCEHOUSE DIARY is a free regular publication published by Dancehouse, Melbourne, Australia. DANCEHOUSE DIARY is a unique dance publication based on discourse, dialogue and connection with other art forms and wider societal issues.

The DIARY is deeply rooted in Joseph Beuys' reflection on the artist's power to be a social sculptor through movement, action and thought, thus inspiring us to live more creatively. It aims not only to cultivate a taste for dance, but to provoke cross-disciplinary thought and to articulate a most necessary connection of our bodies with our minds, of how we move and exist in the world and for the world.

More on the Diary [www.dancehousediary.com.au](http://www.dancehousediary.com.au)  
More on Dancehouse [www.dancehouse.com.au](http://www.dancehouse.com.au)

Front and back cover

Jill Orr, *Between Somewhere and Nowhere*  
Photographer: Christina Simons for Jill Orr

Graphic Design: Famous Visual Services  
[famousvs.com](http://famousvs.com)

ISSN 2203-4161

© All rights reserved. Reproduction without permission is prohibited.

Dancehouse

150 Princes Street, North Carlton, VIC 3054, AUSTRALIA

t: +61 3 9347 2860

f: +61 3 9347 9381

[www.dancehouse.com.au](http://www.dancehouse.com.au)

[www.dancehousediary.com.au](http://www.dancehousediary.com.au)

THE VIEWS AND OPINIONS EXPRESSED IN THIS DANCEHOUSE DIARY ARE THOSE OF THE AUTHORS  
AND DO NOT NECESSARILY REFLECT THE POSITION OF DANCEHOUSE.

## Supporters of Dancehouse

**The Movers** THE BOARD OF DIRECTORS OF DANCEHOUSE / JAMES & LEO OSTROBURSKI / MICHAEL ADENA & JOANNE DALY

**The Shakers** JANE REFSHAUGE

**The Explorers** MURRAY BATCHELOR / ROSEMARY FORBES & IAN HOCKING / SHELLEY LASICA

**The Enthusiasts** The Ostroburski Family Fund / Phillip Adams / Amelia Bartak / Emma Batchelor / Sarah Brash / Kara Burdack / Samantha Chester / Robert Francis Coleman / Maxime Conquet / Michaela Coventry / Elizabeth Day / Wendy Batchelor / Luke George / Lucy Guerin / Sue Healey / Claire Hielscher / Becky Hilton / Lauren Honcope / Gillian McDougall / Fran Ostroburski / John Paolacci / Jerry Remkes / Philipa Rothfield / Clive Rumble / Suzanne Sandford / Jack William Silloray / Helen Simondson / Anouk van Dijk

**The Starters** Annette Abbott / Niels Bienas / Bec Dean / Katharina Dilena / Claire Gilbert / Tom Gould / Richard Gurney / Antony Hamilton / Elizabeth Harvey / Shane Marble / Robert McCredie / Bronwyn O'Brien / Carl Nilsson-Polias / Lucy Parakhina / Steve Rothfield / Lorna Sim / Yana Taylor / Canada White / Jamima Wu

# IN PRAISE OF RITUALS

Angela Conquet

*But man is a noble animal, splendid in ashes, and pompous in the grave, solemnising nativities and deaths with equal lustre, not omitting ceremonies of bravery in the infamy of his nature.* – Sir Thomas Browne

*Just as medieval society was balanced on God and the Devil, so ours is balanced on consumption and its denunciation. Though at least around the Devil heresies and black magic sects were able to organize. Our magic is white. No heresy is possible any longer in a state of affluence. It is the prophylactic whiteness of a saturated society, a society with no history and no dizzying heights, a society with no myth other than itself.* – Jean Baudrillard

## The Profane

Rituals and rites have been central to the study of religion and primitive societies. Since Durkheim, they are deemed legitimate objects for sociologists and have become in recent years a focus for new forms of cultural analysis.

Although sacred rituals are keenly analysed within anthropology and ethnology, the breadth and complexity of our own contemporary rituals are yet to be fully understood. From collective gatherings (funerals, celebrations, marches) to everyday gestures (greeting, cleansing, eating, watching the cherry blossoming), rituals frame our social behaviour in the form of everyday habits, routines and codes.

These forms of cyclic, recurrent activities provide symbolic confirmation of collective values and emotions shared by the members of a community (Durkheim). They have, since immemorial times, reinforced notions of stability, security and, most importantly, belonging. It is precisely by looking into the very few things that still bind us together that studying ritual contributes to an understanding of our contemporary socio-cultural processes. The power of these contemporary rituals is no longer symbolic nor exclusively sacred inasmuch as they are the lynchpin maintaining social integration and systems of authority in place. They are also genuine vehicles of power in their capacity to arouse public emotion and evoke popular enthusiasm (consider the recent AFL Grand Final). In other words, power resides in their capacity to elicit action, manipulate or incite to revolt. In this respect, questions arise regarding the productive capacity of ritual, to produce modes of thought, feeling and emotion, to influence, even manipulate (consider the Third Reich). There is also a patina of authority regarding those who play key roles within ritual (of the current Royal Commission into the sexual abuse of children). To what extent is ritual implicated within the political and economic machiavellisms of our times?

## The Sacred

But let us go back to the more sacred dimension of rituals and this is what takes us to dance. In dance, ritual is allied to the sacred. Many scholars consider that dance emerged in pre-historic societies as a primary form of worshipping rituals. Dance, as ritual, maintained order on a personal, communal and cosmological level. Let us remember that in dance, subject and object are one. The performer is the subject who creates the object, which is, in turn the performer. Georges Bataille defines this as the primary purpose of sacred ritual – to transcend the split between subject and object so that “we could become like ‘water moving in water’ and attain intimacy with all existence.”

Embodied in dance, rituals allow us to perceive, experience and relate to time and space differently. It is interesting to look at ceremonial ritual forms of dance not only as a fascinating technique of ecstasy, but mainly as the corporeal catalyst to bridging this body/mind spilt by investing temporality with a certain experience of the sacred. Rituals help us perceive, experience and relate to time and space differently and allow our inner selves to have revelations of the sacred.

There is no better example than the Dervish dances. Islamic culture gravitates around complete harmony with and dependence on nature. We, Western people, through scientific discoveries and empirical approaches, have created a practical, measurable, yet limited and linear world. Within Western forms of modernity, time is linear, singular and universal. In the Islamic world, time and space depend on nature and parallels the cosmic order and the basic underlying forms that are found in nature. They are not merely circular, which means they revolve and repeat, but rather spiral. They grow and expand in a way that radiates from the centre out. Most architectural, music, painting or movement patterns reflect this understanding of space and time. The Dervish dance is in complete harmony with this understanding and with the cosmic movement.

Dance has moved on from its sacred function. The Roman Empire was the first to operate a desecralisation of dance, well before the Church's persecution and fetishisation of heresies and their wild dances and well before Catherine de' Médici introduced it to the court as entertainment. Arguably, the first use of dance as a ritual to enforce political control was Sun King Louis XIV, who portrayed Apollo in order to appropriate the pagan idol's power – allowing himself to be possessed by a god would have not created the desired effect. Many dances preserved their traditional forms but buried their sacred intent, except for one notable exception: Nijinsky's *Rite of Spring*, a ballet only in name, a wild incarnation of primal rituals in essence.

However, dance today and even more so performance art, are undeniably forms of ritual as they attempt, just like ritual, to affect change both in the participants and the spectators and to immerse us in a particular temporality. All performance contains elements of ritual, for performance as such is already a ritual, be it ritualistic or not. It is fascinating to see Anne Marsh's parallel between the shaman and the performer, who both simply are, they are concerned with revealing themselves and being here and now – as opposed to the actor on stage, who enacts a role.

But is dance and performance a ritual act that can do something?

## Water Moving In Water

If we are to believe that the main function of rituals is in the experience of the sacred in space and time, then yes.

Dominated, alienated and exploited by capitalism, our market society has commodified rituals into barbaric social conventions, conspicuous consumption and conformist thought and behaviour. These rituals are the mirror, not of better gods, but of our worst selves. How else could it be, were we to agree with Baudrillard? “Postmodernity is said to be a culture of fragmentary sensations, eclectic nostalgia, disposable simulacra, and promiscuous superficiality, in which the traditionally valued qualities of depth, coherence, meaning, originality, and authenticity are evacuated or dissolved amid the random swirl of empty signals.”

Marcuse defined the end of transcendence as a world where individuals can neither perceive their true needs or alternative modes of living. Seen in ritual terms, dance and art seem to be the only ones giving us a taste of an extra-ordinary reality, turning us from static, distant audiences into actively engaged witnesses, participants. Furthermore, rituals are one of the very few mechanisms left that make bonds of solidarity possible, whether or not there is consensus or uniformity of belief. Viewed like this, we can comprehend the huge potential ritual has in contemporary society. And its endless potential to help us transcend the mundane and invent new ways to connect us with a certain lost idea of sacred-ness or paradise.

Angela Conquet is the Artistic Director of Dancehouse.

# WATCHING DANCE, RITUALS OF SPECTATORSHIP

Deborah Jowitt

**And in fact, the image of unsuspecting audience members performing pre-determined, ritualised actions in a partially unknown context and without tangible benefit to the universe or the gods seems to resonate with the way we live our lives.**

Attending a dance performance entails social and cultural reciprocity—whether prescribed, or intuited by the viewer. The occasion involves rituals, however small and little pondered these may be. No nineteenth-century patron of the opera or ballet would have thought of not wearing evening attire to a performance. Applause is itself a ritual in Western theatres, attended in upscale venues by cries of “bravo!” and tossed bouquets, in humbler, experimental ones by yipping.

In actual ritual performances, the protocols can be intricate. Consider the Gisaro. This ritual of the Kululi in Papua New Guinea, as described by Edward Schieffelin in his *The Sorrow of the Lonely and the Burning of the Dancers*, involves codes of reciprocity that must be observed by the longhouse hosting the Gisaro and the guests from another longhouse. The guests have done their homework and come prepared with songs that will remind the hosts of places that they have cherished and of the loved ones they have lost. It is expected that the singer-dancers and the attendant chorus will cause the hosts to weep.

Grief then turns to anger, and the four elaborately costumed and made-up male dancers who spell one another until dawn become its recipients. To relieve themselves, members of the host group seize burning torches and put them out against a dancer's body. The

pitch at the end of the sticks is low-burning, and he keeps dancing unless serious injury pulls him out of the fray. At the conclusion of the event, the guests give the hosts small gifts to compensate for having aroused sad memories. After an amount of time has elapsed, they takes their turn at hosting a Gisaro.

The weeping is contagious. The watchers expect to become participants. The dancers know they will be burned. The balance between communities is maintained.

In dance performances taking place in theatres, most of the rites that spectators and performers negotiate aren't spelled out; they spread by a sort of contagion. Audience members observe how those more familiar with the art form behave, or learn the customs by other means (such as newspaper criticism noting that “the audience gave it a standing ovation” or that Mr. X “took numerous bows”).

As I have implied, the place where the performance is to occur, the style of the choreography, and the kind of company presenting it induce different understanding of the rituals involved. I can't recall ever seeing a performance of *The Nutcracker* whose intermissions didn't sprout little girls in their party frocks twirling around the lobby. Few grownups dress up to attend the ballet these days, but the children in the audience, like the children in that ballet's first act, come decked out in their best. You get the impression that they believe that not to do so would be unthinkable, even disrespectful.

Dance being the elusive art that it is, many spectators seize on quantifiable elements of which they can approve or disapprove. Huge leaps invite applause; so do multiple pirouettes. Who has not heard spectators counting under their respective breaths the ballerina's *fouettés* in Act III of *Swan Lake*? They know that custom (and the music) decrees thirty-two turns, which offers them the opportunity to participate in the occasion and express their excitement. The applause in turn fires up the receiving performer.

On occasion, applause may affect choreography. I have been struck (and often dismayed) by changes that have taken place in Alvin Ailey's *Revelations* since that perennial favorite's premiere in 1960. In the duet “Fix Me Jesus,” as performed by Minnie Marshall and

James Truitte decades ago, the man was not a lover, but a supportive figure (a minister perhaps) helping a possibly lost soul. At one moment, he holds out a straight arm, and she leans back against that strong, yet yielding horizontal bar, opening her chest to heaven and lifting one leg as she does so. I'm not sure exactly when audiences began to deem this moment a feat that needed to be applauded. Over the years, many of the female dancers appearing in the duet have lifted their legs higher and higher, arching their bodies far back over the supporting arm and causing their partners to adjust. The now ritualised applause can induce more extreme displays. One dancer, who had previously been a member of the Joffrey Ballet, bent so far backward that her head, like that of a contortionist, circled around to face forward beneath her raised leg.

During years of attending new and controversial forms of dance, I've been aware of how spectators modify their behaviour while figuring out how to interact with the work that they are seeing. Some, of course, don't want to have anything to do with work they deem “not dance.” We've all seen people sneaking past the knees of others, whispering apologies, and hastening toward the exits. On occasion, others have mastered a more defiant almost ritualised response—a noisy retreat, perhaps with an over-the-shoulder complaint, and, if possible, a slammed door.

Audiences who are potentially interested, but perhaps slightly wary of vanguard work may be gently prepared by such devices as pre-performance talks. When Ella Baff, the executive and artistic director of the summer Jacob's Pillow Dance Festival in Massachusetts, makes her ritual appearance on the stage before every show, she is often able to tell the spectators that they are the very first people in the world to see this particular new work. All around the theatre, almost imperceptibly, spines seem to straighten, eyes brighten, and ears prick up. You are among the first! You may love the work or loathe it, but you are present at an event that demands your attention.

Non-proscenium performance spaces have their own rituals of spectatorship—chief among them is the line to enter a theatre whose doors remain closed, almost until performance time, or even after it. Patience is





required, and those unfamiliar with the custom have to be mollified. The first time that I began to think about how spectators prepare for a performance, what expectations they may have, and what rituals they may have to observe occurred in 1973. I was one of those standing for what seemed like a long time in a line that snaked up splintery, well-trodden stairs leading to a former industrial loft in downtown Manhattan. We were waiting to see Meredith Monk's *Education of the Girlchild*. Yet, although occasional glancing at watches occurred and a few weary sighs, almost everyone seemed to know the drill and could guess from experience that, when the door opened, Monk would already be in place for her new solo; that's the reason that we were still outside. Likely we'd be sitting on folding chairs or cushions on the floor once we got in.

Ritual performances in many cultures are expected to affect a society's needs—for rain, for health, for fertility, etc. And in many of them, as in the Gisaro, the line between observing and actively participating may be blurred or deliberately crossed. It's intriguing to see how various choreographers query that boundary in works (often site-specific ones) that are not in themselves rituals, and equally interesting to observe how one's fellow spectator-participants embrace their roles, usually unquestioningly.

Being asked to leave one's coat and bag raises few hackles, although some people among the limited number of spectators attending Noémie LaFrance's 2006 *Home* in a Brooklyn loft wondered why we were told to go into the kitchen first and wash our hands. Yet the atmosphere of ritual that was conveyed by those

instructions (and hints in the advance publicity) had evidently prepared everyone for the unexpected chores that awaited us after we had been ushered to seats around a long dining table. Write with the magic markers provided on the naked body of a woman lying down and inching along the surface before us? Sure. Stick paste-wet strips of paper to her body? Uh okay. This was an art ritual without a purpose beyond the act of seeing-doing-thinking about the multiple meanings that eventually emerged.

At one point in his 2009 *Crotch* (*all the Joseph Beuys references in the world cannot heal the pain, confusion, regret, cruelty, betrayal, or trauma. . .*), Keith Hennessey invited three volunteers from the audience at New York's Dance Theatre Workshop to come and sit close to him in a semi-circle, then asked the rest of us to cluster around. One volunteer held a spool of red thread. Hennessey took the needle end and sewed back and forth between the clothing of each of the three and his own skin, until long red lines connected them to him. The work had all the trappings of a ritual—the hero suffering an ordeal to unite himself with his followers. No one winced, no one drew back. Those gathered couldn't all have been familiar with Hennessey's work. Were they simply up for anything?

And, in fact, the image of unsuspecting audience members performing pre-determined, ritualised actions in a partially unknown context and without tangible benefit to the universe or the gods seems to resonate with the way we live our lives.

**Deborah Jowitt** wrote about dance for *The Village Voice* from 1967 to 2011. She has published two collections: *Dance Beat* (1977) and *The Dance in Mind* (1985), in addition to *Time and the Dancing Image* (1988) and *Jerome Robbins: His Life, His Theatre, His Dance* (2004). She edited and contributed to *Meredith Monk* (1997). She is currently writing a critical biography of Martha Graham. Her essays have appeared in numerous journals and anthologies, and her criticism is now published at [artsjournal.com](http://artsjournal.com). She lectures and conducts workshops worldwide, as well as teaching in the Dance Department of New York University's Tisch School of the Arts. This essay was written for the *Dancehouse Diary*.

# RITUAL AND SHAMANISM WITHIN (PERFORMANCE) ART

Anne Marsh  
in conversation with Philipa Rothfield





Left: Catherine Bell, *Felt is the Past Tense of Feel* (2006), Performance documented on video. Duration 55 minutes.

Courtesy of the artist and Sutton Gallery, Melbourne. Performance stills by Christian Capurro.

**PR: You have recently published a book called *Performance Ritual Document* where you discuss the notion of ritual and shamanism in relation to Jackson Pollock's work. Through that process, you evaluate his place in art history and the way in which he has been constructed in relation to Modernism and later Post Modernism. Could you elaborate on this?**

**AM:** Jackson Pollock is thoroughly canonised within the history of Western Art as a precursor to and then the favoured son or artist/genius of abstract expressionism. Your audience might not know that abstract expressionism was famously used as a weapon in the Cold War. After World War 2, the Americans, in one critic's phrase, stole the concept of the Avant-Garde from Europe. They literally distributed abstract expressionism around the world as an indicator of America's freedom and the new democratic post war order. There has been lots of art history written about that. To my mind, Pollock becomes a pawn in a particular institutional game, if you like, and that is what canonises him.

If we go back to the photographs that were taken of him painting - which are very famous, and arguably the lynch pin - especially for the general public, as they were published in the mass circulating magazine *Life* in 1949 and republished in many other books and journals. Hans Namuth photographs Jackson Pollock flinging the paint on the canvass on the ground just as the Navajo Indians paint, and of course as Indigenous Australians paint. This is not the Western convention of a window onto the world. Jackson Pollock was in Jungian analysis all his life, he was a troubled man, but his mentors were people who believed in shamanism and ritual and so forth. What I am trying to do throughout the book is to try and find the hidden narratives; the ones that haven't been dominant and have been missed out in the quest to canonise a particular story. It always fascinates me what gets left out.

**PR: One of the things you talk about is the extent to which this is a tricky path to tread; that there are problems with the relation between shamanism and primitivism as it is articulated within anthropological discourse. You also talk about the problems around the notion of sexual difference in relation to Pollock's work.**

**AM:** First, there is the canonisation of Pollock that I have just described. Then Feminist art historians get into a revisionist art history and start looking at the great male artist geniuses of modern art and abstract expressionism. Pollock is depicted there as an ejaculatory painter and there are some fabulous feminist tracts on what is wrong with Jackson Pollock from a gendered perspective. There is a reading of him according to revisionist art history, which starts in the 1960s, that points out that Primitivism has been around as a kind of

desire in modern Euro American Art for many years, and that this functions as a kind of valorisation of the Other: the primitive and unknown. That Other, is considered to be able to represent the un-representable. This becomes very romanticised within modern art. The revisionist art historians or the critical left art historians come in and explain how problematic that is. That the West would appropriate the Other in such a way and bring that into a Western canon whilst, at the same time, totally ignoring the indigenous workers.

This has been well critiqued by artists. The late Gordon Bennett, an Australian artist, did major history paintings about this in the 90s. The problem with Primitivism in Western art is a big issue. Nevertheless, Western artists are still interested in Primitivisms. Whether that is the rituals of everyday life or the secular rituals that come to bear where people are looking for a kind of spirituality, if you like, but not necessarily organised religion. These things really influenced the hippy movements of the 60s and 70s. This is where people like Richard Schechner come in. If we look at performance art, it is interesting to note the way in which the performance studies people have a slightly different interpretation to the art historians. Coming out of performance studies, people like Peggy Phelan have quite a different approach to someone like Amelia Jones, both American scholars; but Phelan's coming out of Performance Studies. If you look at someone in Australia like Edward Scheer who writes on Mike Parr, he also came out of that performance studies situation and was not afraid to talk about things like ritual and shamanism. Whereas in the art historical context, because of the critique against Primitivism, this has been a 'no go' zone.

**PR: If we just focused on the notion of ritual, in a way, it is threatened by the problematic history of anthropology and its colonialism, and therefore the way in which the non-Western Other is constructed as 'primitive'. At the same time, there is, maybe, a sense in which there is always an element of the Other within the contemporary and the everyday. So, even though ritual and shamanism has been kept apart from the notion of the contemporary West and its sense of rationality, civil society and the state, perhaps that kind of binarism or separatism cannot be sustained.**

**AM:** No, I don't think it can; I don't think any binary can be accurate. Each term forecloses upon the other; it is always going to be there in some way. If you talk about everyday life and how people are situated in everyday life, from performance to dance: people do yoga practices, Feldenkrais, body centred practices. The idea of the body is a huge concept throughout modern art. The idea of a performative turn is centred on body practices, and bodily practices. These can't necessarily be analysed through a purely rational motivation.

**PR: There is something you're saying about the centrality of the body in certain kinds of practices, where the body may introduce an element of Otherness into rationality. What is at stake in identifying the body as central to certain practices that somehow suggests an element of ritual within the contemporary everyday?**

**AM:** If a practice is centered on the body and it is not simply an analysis of the social construction of the body (a dominant approach within critical theory), if the practice is also about movement, it may be intuitive. If it's about some kind of haptic relation that the performer or the practitioner is having to the space, to their own experience, to the relationship that they are trying to establish with the audience; whether that is participatory or just in terms of them being spectators: other elements come into that which are not purely rational elements.

**PR: So, there is a kind of disruptive potential of the corporeal within certain dominant notions of sociality or subjectivity, or even social practice. I wonder if you provoke a similar disruption, by allowing the question of shamanism, ritual, the artist as shaman, to enter a discussion that so far has been dominated by a modernist perspective, and whether such disruption is greater because of your focus on performance artists and body art.**

**AM:** I think the body is a disruptive element. I think that in the last 20-30 years, theorists and practitioners have come to understand that the body, the somatic, the haptic, are equally important as notions of social construction, especially in the realm of any kind of performance which is centred on the body. That is why I start with Jackson Pollock. Even with a performative painting, we are still talking about the relationship between the body and the representation, if you like.

**PR: I notice there are a couple of terms you use such as the unknown, the unconscious, the abject and the uncanny, as ways of exploring what might be at stake in invoking the figure of the shaman. You talk about Freud and his notion of the unheimlich or the uncanny. Then you look at the turn towards the body in body art (despite the dominance of (post)structuralism at the time). There is a sense in which, and this is a quote from you: 'Artists continued to experiment and investigate the unknown, the unconscious, the abject and the uncanny'. Can you offer an example?**

**AM:** Well, I might talk about a performance by a younger artist, Catherine Bell, because it pays homage to Joseph Beuys, who is considered to be one of the great shamans of Western art from the 60s and 70s. It is also a mourning ritual for her father who had recently died. It's a performance that is presented exclusively for the camera, it's only on video. One of the things I'm interested in

is how do we, as an audience, interact with these new digital technologies. If a performance is just made for the screen, for example, do we find it as compelling as if we would have if we had been there? For the performance, 'Felt is The Past Tense of Feel' (2006), Bell sits with 40 dead squid on a stage painted black. She has had a pink felt suit made, after the suit that they were once going to bury her father in, and she wears this fastened over her father's suit. Joseph Beuys' felt suit which he wore during performances is often displayed as a relic of performance art and it has this shamanistic quality to it. Bell gets the squid and sucks out the squid ink and she spits it on the pink felt suit. Eventually, it's all over the suit, her face and hands so she literally fades to black. The performance lasted about an hour but there are two video cuts of it, one is about 20 minutes and the other is the whole hour duration. After the performance, she got gallstones because you can't suck that much squid ink and not get ill, which she had not realised. For me, it is a younger artist doing an endurance work, the sort of work that we often associated with male artists of the 1970s. Bell talks about her feeling when she was looking into the eyes of the squid and thinking about her father's decomposing body in the ground. You can imagine the smell would have been amazing if you were in the room and the sucking noises, which are not on the video, could have been disturbing. For me, this was a very shamanistic and cathartic action, which is quite abject, because even on the video, you feel this beautiful young woman sucking all of this yucky, icky squidgy thing.

Another artist I could talk about is Dominico de Clario. He is now an established artist who has been doing work about the Chakras for years. He uses different coloured neon lights as representative of the Chakras. What is interesting about Domenico is that he often creates a kind of fictive narrative about the works themselves. One was called 'a solstice event with seven live horses for uqbah' which was performed in 2005. He spins a story about driving along in a car; it is almost like a Carlos Castaneda story. He is driving and he is very tired, and he pulls the car over after he nearly crashed. He winds down his window to get some air and there are these tiny horses. There is a sign about these horses from Uqbah being 'guide horses for the blind'. This is pertinent because de Clario often performs as a blind-folded piano player. He then spins a narrative about the horses and this dream-like encounter. When I was writing about it, and he was sending me materials about what the performance was about, I started to think: I don't think this is true. I don't think what he is actually saying could have actually happened, and I remember writing to him saying 'now I'm quite happy that this didn't happen and I think the fiction is really great but are you happy that it goes ahead like this?' And he said, yes, of course, spin the story. For me that was interesting because often we are looking to get to the truth, and yet Domenico's work is about spinning stories.

**PR: The post colonialist theorist, Dipesh Chakrabarty, argues against subjecting the time of local Indian practices to the temporality of modernism with its notions of truth and falsity. Chakrabarty posits a mythical time in relation to a number of Indian social practices, religions and social forms that was never disrupted by the progressive chronology of the modern. In a way, he makes space for another axis, another temporality, without making it subject to the temporality of modernism.**

**AM:** Yes. If you talk about shamanism, and going back to Castaneda, who was so well read in the seventies. He talks about the shaman's seeing. The seeing of the shaman is always about a story. When you do any research on shamanism, when the West comes in and criticises it and says 'that can't possibly be true' and the shamans say, 'well it's not true, we are spinning the story'. The people believe in the story. That is where the healing will happen. Who is to say that that isn't as effective as Western healing?

**PR: It's the power of placebo as conceptualised in Western thought.**

**AM:** So if I suck something out of your neck and I have it in my mouth and I spit it out, and it's an ugly thing and you believe that is what has come out of your body.

**PR: I'd be thrilled...**

**AM:** I'd be thrilled too, rather than going to hospital and being butchered in a very medieval way by someone cutting into you and taking something out and not showing you. I'm being a bit facetious but these different ways of knowing, which have been foreclosed upon, are always going to be intriguing for artists. The greatest art historian of all time could say, 'no this is not the case, you can't do this.' But many artists will say 'a door has been closed. I'm going to open that door'. What has been hidden, what has been foreclosed upon, this is what some artists are going to make work about.

**PR: From what you were saying about the centrality of narrative for a certain notion of shamanism, I wonder how that is transposed to practices such as performance, especially practices of performance art and certainly dance that are not so narrative based. Is that maybe where the notion of ritual comes in to the fore as distinct from the notion of shamanism?**

**AM:** Yes I think so. The shaman relies on the presence or the charisma of the particular person, or the fiction of the person. Joseph Beuys always used to say when he went to a university that is all locked down in rationalism, he had to be this kind of seer, this kind of shaman, otherwise people wouldn't be interested. He is purposely creating that narrative around him. With dance and performance modes that aren't narrative, or narrative in a different kind of way via the body centrality of the performance,

these practices can always instil a sense of ritual. I think ritual has a temporal mode to it. But I think that the 'being here now' aspect of dance has a presence that is different from the narrative or fictive presence of the shaman who wants to create a particular character.

**PR: How might we look at body based practices as occurring in a ritualised context? It might not be around the figure of the shaman as such but there are performance rituals; the proscenium arch stage, the Melbourne Festival ritual of all the crowds going to see things at the Arts Centre that is a ritual too.**

**AM:** I think ritual is in our lives in very ordinary ways, I think that artists have been interested in the everyday and everyday rituals. You go along the road and someone has died and people create little shrines to them. That is just a very ordinary way of doing things. Social media is being used as a tool to create flash mob rituals. Some of them are absolutely brilliant and people just come along and participate in these things. Like [boat-people.org](http://boat-people.org) who invited people to wrap their heads in replicas of the Australian flag and visit different public spaces. They then sent in their pictures to a website that everyone could access. I think rituals of everyday life, rituals of the body, are pervasive. We wash our body, we take care of it, we do exercise classes, walking is a kind of ritual, an everyday meditation.

**PR: Very much so, it is also culturally configured. A lot of Foucault's work is very much looking at that. That's looking at ritual as inscriptive and also relational to notions of subjectivity.**

**AM:** I don't think that ritual is going to go away. It is so embedded in our condition that we are going to be doing that all the time. Artists will look at those rituals of everyday life and deconstruct them in a way and see how they are put together.

---

**Dr Anne Marsh** is Professorial Research Fellow at the Victorian College of the Arts, The University of Melbourne. Anne is author of *Performance\_Ritual Document\_* (Macmillan 2014), *LOOK: Contemporary Australian Photography since 1980* (Macmillan 2010), *Pat Brassington: This is Not a Photograph* (Quintus/University of Tasmania, 2006), *The Darkroom: Photography and the Theatre of Desire* (Macmillan, 2003) and *Body and Self: Performance Art in Australia, 1969-1992* (Oxford University Press, 1993) which was recently revised as an e-book available on Amazon. Anne is a contributing editor for *Eyeline: Contemporary Visual Arts* and she publishes regularly in the arts press.

## Read More :

Anne Marsh, *Performance\_Ritual Document\_*, Melbourne: Macmillan, 2014.



# CONTEMPORARY DANCE AND ITS RITUALS: THE EXAMPLE OF A WORK BY ALAIN PLATEL

Betty Lefèvre

Translation by Modjtaba Sadria

**The contemporary dance performance belongs to this “romantic” sociality and to the “useless” activities that allow for sensed experience, a lived emotion, an imaginary, a meditation. Furthermore, it can, in general, stage physical and psychological singularities, the everyday, our ordinary gestures, those small nothings whose repetition symbolises the derided and tragic meaninglessness and tragedy of existence.**

In a secularised world, recognising the ritual aspects of our behaviour can be a heuristic tool to reconnect us with an anthropological approach to body culture, as well as giving new meaning to our human experiences, even in their most archaic echoes.

If, following the work of Marcel Mauss, Henri Hubert and Emile Durkheim, it could be said that ritual is a very general instrument of regulation of social relations, involving cohesion and integration, ties and community, it is worth adding that “ritual is a question of individual and collective behaviours which are relatively codified, and have a more or less repetitive bodily support (verbal, gestural, postural) that are heavily symbolic both for the actors, and normally also for the witnesses. Ritual is based on non-conscious mental attachment to values related to important social choices, and whose anticipated effectiveness is not due to a purely empirical

logic exhausting itself in the technical instrumentality of cause-effect” (Riviere).

Thus, one possible way of interpreting contemporary dance performance is as a profane ritual where a staging of bodies is rehearsed or of a rite of “passage”, in the sense proposed by Arnold Van Gennep (1909). Between reality and the imaginary, self and other, symbolic sequences which, when the show succeeds, changes you and transports you, puts you into movement – which is the original meaning of “emotion”.

Through these different choreographic productions, the viewer of the dance will confront what Daniel Sibony calls “The event of being”, that is, that magical moment when what is happening on the stage makes you move, displaces you, because it is telling you “body stories”, those stories which belong to your “Other body”, or “possible encounters with the Other’s body...”.

Contemporary dance is certainly a vast field of innovative forces, with blurred contours and multiple, hybrid forms. A sociologist such as Edgar Morin would qualify it as a complex object whose value, amongst others, is to force us to “face uncertainties”, but also to make our knowledges converge or interact.

According to the subjectivity of their creators, contemporary dance works suggest an aesthetic relation with reality (in the Mafessolian sense of the concept of sensed relation), but also a constant breaking with any tendency to create a model of the body. Categories cannot hold here because there is so much emphasis on singularities of creative approach and on savouring present experience and emotion.

Therefore, without claiming any kind of exhaustive interpretation, to develop our argument, we retain three elements of these “new” rituals of body relations in contemporary dance performance: the deconstruction of reality, aesthetics of the ordinary, and the vertigo of Alice’s mirror.

The methodology used here will be ethnographic, based on a participant observation from which is proposed a re-reading of a work that demonstrates the “rituals” cited above: namely, Alain Platel’s *Let’s op Bach*.

Our frame of analysis will borrow extensively from Michel Mafessoli’s discourse (1985) and from the challenges that he raises for sociology, by underlining the importance of the everyday, the ordinary, common sense, the banal, behind which the deepest sense of our humanity is hidden. This spotlighting of apparently “secondary” social phenomena links to the micro-sociological preoccupations of Erving Goffman (1974), but also to work by Jean Duvignaud (1980), in terms of its interest in the “price of priceless things”, and in “aimless” activities: carnivals, parties, day dreams, imagination, to the “sensed forms of social life” of Pierre Sansot (1986). To summarise, one could suggest with Marc Guillaume (1993) that these writers, each in his own way, is arguing for “a poetic approach to the social”, and in proposing to interrogate what Jean-Francois Dortier calls “a re-enchanting daily life”.

The contemporary dance performance belongs to this “romantic” sociality and to the “useless” activities that allow for sensed experience, a lived emotion, an imaginary, a meditation. Furthermore, it can, in general, stage physical and psychological singularities, the everyday, our ordinary gestures, those small nothings whose repetition symbolises the derided and tragic meaninglessness and tragedy of existence.

It is from these elements that one can imagine contemporary dance as a “ritualised” ceremony, through its integration of social, symbolic and psychological dimensions.

In what sense is the ritual of staging the body in contemporary dance a deconstruction?

If for David Le Breton the body disappears in the “presence-absence” of habits, for Daniel Sibony, it emerges from the field of “absolute non-representability”. To seek to inscribe it only within an objective frame or to give of it an efficient, rational, mastered image is only a trap or an exaggerated reduction. Because, if our society legitimises practices of sur-representation (over-representation) of order (an order that it classifies, simplifies, and makes uniform), the other energy (force) working on the understanding of the living body is the force that disorganises, and takes into consideration the

irreducible disorder that resides within the body, and activates it.

Along with other artists, contemporary choreographers are trying to put on stage the other side of our bodily "décor", to deconstruct a too disinfected reality, to allow us to see what makes sense in our being in the world, our richness, but also our bodily sadness due to an often taboo or disavowed, hidden body.

## The example of an Alain Platel choreography

The work of choreographer Alain Platel is a very explicit case in this regard. In order to best establish the relevance of this case, I will briefly introduce the artist. As part of the contemporary dance environment of the 1980s, Platel created the Belgian Contemporary Ballets (Ballets C de la B) presenting hybrid performances that masterfully orchestrate different pessimistic and joyful atmospheres. Amongst his peers were Maguy Marin, with her "May B" inspired by the theatre of Samuel Beckett, or Joseph Nadj with his 1995 dance-circus performance "The Cry of the Chameleon"; Mathilde Monnier's choreography "Arretez, Arretons, Arrete" on the issue of the normal and abnormal; and DV8 Physical Theatre with choreographer Lloyd Newson's provocative violent and tender men's rituals; Doriane Moretus with her last work "Butterfly blues"; and finally, Philippe Genty, whose oneiric universe mixes puppet theatre and dance.

Platel's works are reminiscent of the influence of Pina Bausch, perhaps the most important figure of the 80s. Provocative, disrespectful, desperate, she always used dance and theatre forcefully, thus realising the hope of Artaud to liberate theatre from the reign of speech.

Platel's favourite universe involves conjuring differences and especially placing on stage outsiders, extra-normal characters, mad children or adults, society's marginal figures. He is thus close to the imagination of film-maker Kusturica in "Black cat, white cat", to Jerome Savary, Kantor, Brecht in theatre, and to Francis Bacon in painting and to Marcel Duchamp in his presentation of the ready-made. Platel wrote in 1988: "Essentially, all my works have to do with the way that people make-do in their relations." This gives birth to bizarre images and dance dialogues which together form a chaotic story.

## The deconstruction of Reality

In one of his creations *Lets op Bach* Platel has nine dancers, eight musicians and three singers on stage, dismantling, like many of the artists mentioned above, the partitions between dance, circus, theatre, opera...

On the stage, the décor is a collection of bric-a-brac creating different spaces with specific atmospheres: a no-man's-land, an attic, a disused factory, the exotic terrace of a house whose glory days are long past; in short, a space that is neither microcosm or macrocosm, "the place of a non-place" to use the expression of another "re-enchanter" of daily life, Henri Lefebvre, cited by Jean-Marc Lachaud. He specifies: "The place of a non-place is when the dancing body, projects itself/me into a utopian country, a country of happiness, or of grandiose suffering, a country of dreams" (J.M. Lachaud). This spatialising is the first step in a ritual of deconstruction of the real, since heterogeneous elements of our daily

environment are juxtaposed or are condensed on stage, as in a patchwork.

This creative process has been evoked by Claude Levi-Strauss with regard to Marcel Proust's "The research". Levi-Strauss says that Proust is like a tailor who patches an old dress and works with the leftovers. He observes that this technique of assembling and collage makes the work the outcome of a dual articulation, that is, each element is a work participating in a higher work (C. Levi-Strauss).

Through this unsettling regard, this wandering, each spectator can create his/her own coherence, reconstructing a universe or recreating his/her own performance in the sense that there is the possibility for a multitude of readings. Instead of its conventional immobility, the audience borrows the "donkey's way" of Gilles Lapouge but it is a virtual road, a temporality, a space, a meaning to what is seen, beyond the disparity of spaces and dancing bodies. Besides, doesn't the paradox of the spectator in contemporary dance reside in his/her apparent immobility, while in fact he is impatient for an emotional transport, "to have been moved" during one of these magic syntonic (being-with) moments between the one who gives and the one who receives?

Another ritual of deconstruction, the one of the bodily relation.

To enter a performance space is to take part in what Erving Goffman calls "an arrangement of ritualised visibility". Beyond two clearly distinguished and separated territories (that he calls a micro-ecology of interactions), the rule is that the audience has to be still, silent and attentive while onstage, in front of them, bodies are delivered to the collective and focused eyes of the audience. These rites of interaction between spectators and actors are organised according to social conventions and create a metaphor of the social bond, that is, says David Le Breton "the functioning of the social links requires a coherent semiotics and mise-en-scene of the self in its relation with others; a continuous thread of sense or meaning, thus organising social links". The microsociology of Erving Goffman also emphasises the function of the gaze, because "of all our sense organs the eye has a unique sociological function".

In *Lets op Bach*, there is always a multiplicity of actions to watch, actions apparently taking place autonomously and forcing us to have a nomadic view. The eye is forced to choose between "creatures" or characters who behave or are dressed strangely, at the limit of normality (some critics have described them as "going off the rails"). For instance, the eight musicians and the three singers who are on one side of the downstage area, on the "terrace". They have shorts and sandals and open exotic shirts; thus rather unsettling our expectations of the way we expect that opera singers or classical music musicians should appear on stage. As for the dancers-actors-saltimbanques, these are "personalities" whose bodies contrast the Apollonian, masterful and victorious classical body. Children are on stage, including a beautiful little girl (two or three years old) walking fragile and at risk, between the dancers who change neither their trajectory, nor even the force of their movements. A woman dancer practices one of the variations with a prosthesis on her knee, another dancer with a fake scar on his face transforms into a "rapping machine". Another unforgettable image is of a duet between a painted

transvestite in high heels and a red dress and a "cow-boy" who has lost one of his leather boots. The porters are reminiscent of figures from a classical ballet swerving towards Francis Bacon.

The bodies in the work are often distorted, wasted, mortified, indistinct (they could be man or woman, women or child...), but they are at the same time particularly alive in their capacity to surprise us, to create the unknown out of the known, to make us laugh at our own misery. In this they connect with our contemporary questions: masculinity and femininity, commercialised childhood, the search for the perfect body, the paradoxes and suffering of homosexuality, media scandals, indifference, performance...

Like any work of art, the work of Alain Platel echoes Nietzsche's discourse (ed. 1977) on the duality of the Apollonian and Dionysian, where the coming and going between order and disorder are expressed paradoxically but are always current. On the same subject, Michael Maffesoli affirms the reappearance of Dionysian values in our contemporary society, disturbing our rational and enlightened minds. He writes: "it seems that the characteristics of Dionysos, in counterbalancing the force of productive and progressivist values, allow for a subterranean equilibrium which supports social continuity. Furthermore they shed light on a whole series of situations which are currently becoming widespread. [...] A new relation to the body as an object of pleasure, dances which are reminiscent of the innumerable phallic dances, a resurgence of orgiastic parties."

He calls this counter balance between the values of order in our society and Dionysian values the "baroquisation" of the world. We might say that Platel and other artists put this "esprit baroque" into dance, theatre, painting, that is, into acts. Beyond a taste for an abundance of heteroclitic objects and characters, we can say with Philippe Beaussant that "everything that privileges movement, the flightiness of things, metamorphosis, is baroque ... as is the mirror".

As for Deleuze, he affirms that "the operative concept of the Baroque is the Fold...It makes and remakes folds, pushing them to infinity, fold upon fold, fold according to fold...as if infinity had two floors: the folds of matter and the folds in the soul". Once again, contemporary dance participates in the resurgence of this baroque spirit where folded, unfolded, refolded bodies infinitely symbolise the folds of the spirit.

## Aestheticisation of the ordinary

Deconstruction of our spatial co-ordinates, of the possibility of "bodying oneself", Platel's performance proposes, however, in an apparent disorder, an imaginary reconstruction of another relation to the other, each body referring to the ordinary but also to the originality of each. This is what I have called the estheticisation of the ordinary in reference to sociological work on sensuous and everyday life. For each of us, Platel's "tribe" offers a rite of "passage" like a fairground seen through a distorting mirror: knowledge and recognition of the self takes place fleetingly and at the same time, rises up out of other images of the body, from our multiple realities, our shadow zones. This play of reflections allows the fleeting and magical appearance of moments of truth and impressions of life.

The bodies on stage offer a truth that can be described as subversive, since it is not a matter of applauding disciplined bodies, as Michel Foucault would put it, but of recognising what makes sense in/through the flesh of this performance or, according to Joseph Nadj (1997), of making the invisible visible. Thus, Platel's work dances our ordinary life. It is not a work of art reserved for an elite, but a popular practice of art, where anyone can find a sensuous form and recognise themselves in it, no longer being subject to a demand to conform but constructing his/her difference, finding his/her subjectivity again.

Platel's performance reveals the hidden energies and precise forces of the body, which takes us back to Deleuze's comments on the deformation of the body in Bacon's work as the "the result of forces that perhaps constitute the true subject of the work: the painting of forces rather than faces, bodies or appearances". This is what it is about: dancing the organic forces that traverse us and not the forms that are legitimated, academic, official. Platel's dance is equally a symbolism in the etymological meaning of the term, and as Daniel Mesguish writes of "ballein: I carry, I support"; in other words that which unites me with the other, with radical alterity and which brings us together beyond our differences. Strangely, it is this "unrepresentable" body which will help me to reconstruct my own image, to find the path to a re-assembled body, provisionally unified outside of the "choreotypes" of academic dance.

This esthetics of the ordinary, that is, this feeling in common that allows feelings and sensations to be shared, makes direct reference to the notion of postmodernity developed by Maffesoli who defines it as "this organic mixture of archaic and other elements that could not be more contemporary...a mixture that obeys a 'contradictory' logic that makes no claim to surpass contradiction in a perfect synthesis but on the contrary maintains it as such. Postmodernity is a harmony of contraries". In this sense, our life in contemporary society and the contemporary dance that makes it visible can be described as postmodern, for as Maffesoli points out "like a patchwork it is made from totally disparate elements between which constant interactions of aggression and amiability, love or hate take place, but which nevertheless form a specific solidarity that we must take into account".

Platel makes visible this postmodern sociality: by juxtaposing a sound scape from the 18<sup>th</sup> century borrowed from Bach, piecing together strange connections in our imagination, rehabilitating the Dionysian and/or socially marginal body and questioning the mediatised underpinnings of the everyday (Dutroux, Diana), he makes "a tumultuous marriage between heaven and hell" and from these different rites, reorganises the world in his own way. One might argue that he stages "the social fracture", that is, the dance is socially engaged along the lines of Beckett and he is the apostle of what Alain Touraine in his last work puts forward as tomorrow's fundamental cultural transformation: "to be equal and different" (A Touraine, 1999).

But Platel's proposition is not limited to a denunciation of the social forces at work in contemporary society. He certainly emphasises the difficulties of human relations but he does this in order to better show the paradoxical logic of our humanity, that which has to do with the meaning of our togetherness and our essence. This (monstrous) showing is always tinged with irony, joyful derision, humour, and the kind of celebration associated with the tradition of farce and the grotesque.

## The vertigo of Alice's mirror

The final piece in the puzzle of ritualisation in dance performance is the felt, the proof of the sensed, of emotion.

What provokes this emotional tension is both what separates me from exhibited bodies and what links me organically to them. The metaphor "from the bridge and the doorway" used by Georges Simmel (1989:159) is very explicit in relation to this. My position as spectator, and social decorum, requires that I remain at a distance from the stage, that I install a symbolic doorway between the dance and the public. The performance invites me in across this space to build a bridge or better, to jump to the other side of the mirror. It is in this sense that I propose to give to the word "vertigo", it is the felt sense of the jump, of the gyration, the fall, the quest for self: which are so many fundamental movement elements of contemporary dance.

The function of contemporary dance can no longer be simply confused with entertainment because it inscribes in its bodies our fragmentations, our daily struggles, our banal habits. As such, it becomes a mirror revealing and deforming our trivial existences, a space in which to see and review ourselves. As already noted, there is certainly considerable conflictual tension in the relations that Platel puts forward (between men and women, men and men, men and little girls...). The spectator, troubled, confronts him or herself through this troubling, this interior movement which obliges him or her to ask what it is s/he seeks or wants to be – to jump into the mirror. In making the felt visible, the invisible is shadowed by the violence of the gaze upon the self – whether as dancer or spectator. The dizzying work of Platel is also this passage to the other side of the mirror as in Lewis Carroll's "Alice". On the other side, it is my double that I find there and the vertigo I experience is that of the plurality of images of myself that contemporary dance proposes, the experience of a real hall of mirrors.

The experience of vertigo is reinforced by glimpses of freedom, of flights and falls, magical transformations, the joy of an embrace or spontaneous posture but also by the laughter that it provokes which even if, as Jean Duvignaud puts it, it is just "a fleeting outburst which, like pleasure, happiness, sensuality serves no purpose, 'it participates', like humour, derision, and the grotesque in the same plot, that of overturning the world's order with a moment, however brief, of hilarity" (J. Duvignaud, 1985). Our laughter accompanies this scandalous dancing body, the object of all desires, always slipping out of our grasp. Its spasmodic echo identifies them in all of their metamorphoses and suggests an irreverent and iconoclastic sociality.

The final element giving the effect of vertigo in Platel's work is the principle of repeated movement. While the musicians and singers console with Johann Sebastian Bach as a voice of desire and ecstasy, the dancers begin a marathon of falling in which contact with the ground becomes noisier, more abrupt, painful and it seems as though it is the silent exhortations of the spectators to call off this masochistic ritual that marks its cessation.

This work of repetitive complexity is not simple reproduction of the same, since any repetition creates difference as any order creates chaos. Edgar Morin would say that this "dialogue" of repetition-difference

creates our sense of our being in the world, and works to elaborate the myths of our contemporary corporealities.

Platel's choreography, by putting into vibration the repetitiveness of the quotidian, inscribes our ordinary, our everydayness in the work of art. As with some pathologies, the dancing body gives flesh to the repeated gesture and puts it forward as a foundational act or ultimate repetition – the one that plays between life and death, the known and the unknown, the visible and the invisible, the real and the imaginary.

In conclusion: if we can consider that the works of Alain Platel represent a choreographic "renewal" described as "dance theatre", it is possible that contemporary dance performances are rituals displacing reality towards imagination, a "Dionysiac" reconstruction of sociality, rituals of social interaction, symbolic rituals of polysemic readings. All this can be summarised with Maffesoli by the idea of ritual "where bodies makes themselves into epiphanies".

But is it really new? Didn't the fairground and the traditional dances of yore participate in the same rites? Isn't it the case that, "Festival is by definition the time and space of the extraordinary with all the extraordinary bodies rubbing shoulders, fusing together, and finally giving meaning to their everyday, anchoring it more firmly in toil (F. Loux)? With the great carnivalesque tradition of inverting values having almost disappeared, will the institution allow participation in a cathartic ritual around bodily taboos so that the joy of seeing the underside, the exalting in strangeness and the Rabelasian grotesque, can endure.

Platel's performance has a lot to do with this resurgence of festive upheaval, at once controlled and excessive. These rites orchestrate our aroused spectatorial sensibilities; and, for the synthesis that it offers, I will cite Jean-Marc Lachaud: "Through the complexity of a meaning (sens) which folds, refolds, unfolds, evades, which is always rebuilding even in meaninglessness, we are invited to a ritual of "mourning without pathos", to use Jean-Marc Adolphe's analysis. And yet, for those who accept the cuts that the shattered mirror of delirious bodies inflicts upon them, it is perhaps the beginning of an eventual rescue" (Lachaud).

**Betty Lefèvre** is a Professor Emeritus of the University of Rouen in Anthropology of Embodied Practices. Her research and writings focus on the moving body (artistic or athletic) as an embodied space of social imaginary and re-creation of individual and collective identities. Some of her most recent papers are: *Male Bodies, Female Bodies – On the use of nudity in contemporary dance – a study of Olivier Dubois' Tragedy* (Cultures Corporelles, PURH, University of Rouen); *Body at play and sensitive experience*, University of Oxford, « Consumer Culture Theory » Seminar, 2012.

Full original notes on [dancehousediary.com.au](http://dancehousediary.com.au)

*a re enchanted  
daily life*





In what ways embodied practices could be said to perform or evoke notions of ritual? To what extent can dance/performance/theatre be considered a form of ritual today, and if so, what elements of this practice constitute ritual?

# Yumi Umiumare

What is ritual? Some have said, modern Japanese people are born into a Shinto ritual, get married at a Christian church then die in a Buddhist ceremony. I've grown up with all sorts of mixed-traditional rituals, social disciplines and modern rituals combined with superstitions. Like, when we hear an ambulance passing, we hide our thumb. If you put on your right shoe first, you will have good luck for the day. If you feel nervous, you should write the character of a 'person' on your palm then swallow them three times. After the cremation of a body, bones are passed with chopsticks in a silent ritual. But we never ever pass food between two people using chopsticks. It's taboo. Some rituals have strong meanings and long histories behind them. But some have no meaning and are even absurd. It can be quite religious or personal, but regardless, I find that in these moments of participating in rituals, there is somehow a sincere state, in which we 'believe' something may transform. I love rituals - as I love transformation.

For me, dance/theatre/performance is a ritual in itself. It creates a gateway for performer and audience, to move from the ordinary to the extra-ordinary. Conducting rituals together, we sometimes successfully transform or even provoke an altered state of consciousness. I am fascinated in exploring this 'crack' - this moment of transformation, where both spirit and body are propelled into another world or existence. In our show *ZeroZero\**, I am brushing my teeth as a part of my movement. And through the repetition of this mundane action, the 'crack' opens and takes us into a shamanistic world, in which I find myself channeling the memory of a blind shaman in Osore-zan, the northern part of Japan.

So, daily routine becomes the tool for the unusual transformation of our mundane realities. I love to keep feeding our 'gullible curiosity' through these magical and unknown rituals of theatre and dance.

\*ZeroZero by Tony Yap, Yumi Umiuware and Matthew Gingold, is a dance work exploring the liminal spaces between the visible and invisible.

Born in Hyogo, Japan, **Yumi Umiumare** is trained in classical ballet and modern dance. Yumi is the only Japanese Butoh Dancer in Australia and creator of original Butoh Cabaret works. A member of the seminal Butoh Company DaiRakudakan in Tokyo, she came to Australia to perform at the Melbourne International Festival in 1991. Yumi has appeared in numerous productions in Australia, Japan, Europe, and south-east Asia.

## Linda Luke

When I think about Rituals of Now, I think about Immediacy – Presence – Now-ness. That ephemeral ‘now’ that always dies and re-makes itself, in every instant. How can we create a ritual to remind us of where we are – now? ‘Now’ being two-fold; in terms of our awareness of being right here, right now; but also of being conscious of what is relevant to our contemporary times.

In researching my solo piece *Still Point Turning*, I thought that 'turbulence' and 'fragmented' were the most apt words to describe my experience of our contemporary times, reflecting on the bit mapped, sped up digital world we live in. I was also interested in how to make us present to the 'now' by playing with notions of stillness and silence. How could I mark out time and space to elucidate differing temporal realities? As I write in response to this article's question, I wonder if *Still Point Turning* is a ritual. Is all performance a ritual of sorts?

Between the poles of silence, we could say that the hushed moments mark the bookends of a ritual. The hushed moments before the performance begins and the moment at the end, before the applause create these moments of silence. If we were to consider performance as ritual, then what is it that makes it so? Perhaps it's the shared collective experience where we come together for a specific duration of time. As a collective, we give a turbo-charged sphere of attention to the person or persons performing a series of movements in a space that is 'formalised' or framed in a particular way. All this is to signify that we are to prepare ourselves – audience and performer - to be transported out of the everyday time-frame and into a place of distillation. Perhaps with an intention to discover something new about the way we experience the world or a hope to become lost in an instant – a timeless moment. Whether we are transported or not, is not the point – but perhaps it is the hope 'to be transported' that underlies what ritual is really about.

**Linda Luke's** dance and choreographic practice aims to reveal hidden nuances of poetry, to deepen sensitivity and excavate the subtle undercurrents we experience in relation to self, each other, and our external environment. Linda is presenting her latest work, *Still Point Turning* at Dancehouse as part of DANCE TERRITORIES Rituals of Now season.

Left: Hellen Sky - *Spheres of IN-fluence*, Cite des Arts rituals, Paris 2014

Right: Sarah-Jane Norman, *Corpus Nullis Blood Country*, 2011, image Penelope Benton



Ritual gestures are interesting as they are ancestrally haunted, and as such, may provide a visceral pathway to rethinking our histories. It's through ritual that we substantiate and situate ideas within the flesh, and through calling up and repositioning these gestures, we might seek to agitate the closed circuits of the enculturated body.

## Soo Yeun You

In the traditional dance practice in my culture, ritual in dance performance is directed towards recognition of the connection between body and nature within space.

The practice of walking and breathing is a key element for producing this sense of connection to nature. Walking and breathing sounds ordinary, but within Korean dance practice, it is a long term discipline and is performed as a route into the extra-ordinary reality of the dance tradition.

My research investigates ritual practices and the ways they transform our physical, emotional and affective sense of 'being'. I am interested in collaborations which focus on the ways ritual functions within Indigenous Australian and Korean traditional dance and how traditional materials can be transformed into contemporary rituals. I'm working on a new creative research project with Torres Strait Island dancer and cultural consultant, Albert David that will further explore the intersections of Korean and Torres Strait Island (TSI) traditional cultural views with Asian philosophies of yin and yang and shamanist practices - especially in regard to life and death. Our process will be grounded in exploring the presence of ritual body based practices in the dance performance.

Some examples of the material for my creative work include Albert's stories of his Grandmother's funeral ceremony which was performed by his family for three years after her death. I have reinterpreted and responded to Albert's stories through my experience of the Korean traditional shamanistic ritual known as 'Gut'.

The creative motif 'Gut' is a meeting place of life-death, yin-yang, East-West, and tradition- modernity. It is a concept that will be explored within Australian Indigenous dreaming and Korean Shamanism.

**Soo Yeun** has been trained in traditional dance from Korea. She has performed at the Lincoln Centre, New York, the American Museum of Natural History and Battery Park. Yeun has also toured her work extensively throughout Canada and Spain. Soo Yeun immigrated to Australia in 2002 where she completed her Postgraduate Diploma in 2004 followed by a Masters of Choreography in 2009. She is currently a PhD candidate in the Victoria College of Art Faculty at Melbourne University. Soo Yeun's dance projects *Reliquary* and *Gut* have explored Korean Shamanism and Indigenous Australian spirituality collaboratively since 2007.

## Sarah-Jane Norman

The relationship between (secular, artistic) performance practice and (religious, un-religious, sacreligious) ritual practice is a cyclical question that I, as a maker of live, body-driven work, am obliged to continually answer, re-answer, re-phrase and re-question.

In this sense, I don't know where to begin addressing this exceptionally broad provocation; from my position, I find it difficult to identify an aspect of performance that could not in some respect be configured as a ritual practice. And in my definition of performance, I mean to include not just my terrain of performance/live art (however one is supposed to define that at this point), but also theatre, dance, music and competitive sport. All of these forms are essentially ritualistic in their origins and character, and an argument could be made for the "sacred" function of each.

Personally, I am not invested in invoking any binary distinction between sacred and profane- such a delineation gestures to myriad moral and social structures I am not interested in reinforcing, either with my compliance or my resistance. Nor am I necessarily interested in staking a pseudo-spiritual intention to my own work, or my reading of anyone else's. Not because I reject this intention, but because I think there is a critical peril in this kind of naming.

I use a great number of devices, materials and practices in my work that could variously be rendered as ritualistic, in the post- Artaudian sense: blood, piercing, physical risk and endurance, animal products, repetition and gestural incantation. Indeed, a number of my works have been configured as contemporised rituals - words such as "initiation" have been used liberally, especially in relation to my piercing and blood-based works. Again: I don't negate this reading, nor do I actively affirm it. It's true that I seek to implicate the flesh explicitly within the performance experience, and that there lies a potential for the numinous reveal itself by route of physical extremes. Does this qualify as "ritualistic"? That depends entirely on the definition of ritual. For something to be of "ritual" character, in the strictest sense, has nothing to do with sacredness. This is to conflate ritual with ceremony: they are not the same thing.

The principal character of ritual is repetition; it is through repetition that meaning is inscribed and, over time, shifts. Ritual gestures are interesting to me insofar as they are ancestrally haunted, and as such, may provide a visceral pathway to rethinking our histories. It's through ritual that we substantiate and situate ideas within the flesh, and through calling up and repositioning these gestures, we might seek to agitate the closed circuits of the enculturated body.

**Sarah-Jane Norman** is a cross-disciplinary artist and writer, known for her performance and installation practice but also as a writer of fiction, criticism, essays and poetry. In addition to her work with the Red Room Company on *The Poetry Object* and *The Disappearing*, her work has also been published in *Meanjin*, *Overland*, *Stylus*, *The Cultural Studies Review*, the *National Association for the Visual Arts (NAVA) Quarterly*, *Realtime*, the *UTS Anthology*, as well as placing in a number of awards including the *Overland/Judith Wright Prize* for poetry and the *DJ (Dinny) O'Hearn Award*.

# Shared Vision

Alice Heyward

At any given moment, we are the present embodiment of the past, as well as the life of the future. Life and death rituals exist so that we can attempt to access and connect to the world of the dead and inherited, the eternally unknowable, engaging our memory to extend the life of the deceased, to reproduce cycles in time and space.

*Ritual* is an ageless notion comprising multiple simultaneous parameters: personal, communal; religious, secular; political, spiritual; Western, Indigenous; alive, dead; memory, prophesy—each aspect indivisible from its opposite.

We practice rituals to find release valves, to create alternative experiences of reality, to disrupt our sense of the 'everyday', and to generate new social relations. I was recently in Keith Hennessy's Research Project *Unsettling Modernism* at Impulstanz Vienna, where we explored a Holotropic breathing ritual, developed by Stanislov Grof, deriving from Gestalt therapy, which produces a sensorial, psychedelic, LSD-esque experience. There are ancient communal breath rituals in every culture, bringing awareness to our primary energetic function. Holotropic Breathwork transforms the passing of time in ways similar to how, when performing, hours can seem like minutes. This practice is very different from drug taking, where there is a sense of involuntary voltage. It is a process from which we may choose to depart at any point. It is an extreme example of the dizzying, trance-like teenage pastime of holding one's breath until the point of passing out, or when children spin around breathlessly until they fall over.

For me, this was a highly intense experience, where my physical and emotional body transformed, and I temporarily entered a state of amplified distress. This occurrence was far more severe than that of other participants, requiring their attention. The division between people's experiences is paradoxically necessary to an overall *shared* experience. Many collective rituals depend on *something* 'other' occurring. The Native American Church practises a legal ritual of peyote consumption, in which vomiting is a natural aspect for *some*, causing people to attend to one another. Both choreographically and socially, for some to be up, others are down.

Hennessy initiated rituals to do with death, healing and therapy; again, subjects which will always involve speculation, and are the nuclei of rituals in numerous cultures. In order to investigate these ideas, within the larger ritual of Impulstanz, a degree of pretence is required. A contrived reality is a practice in itself, here referred to as *Shamanic Potential*, devised by Hennessy, Valentina Desideri and Jennifer Lacey, by performing *fake* healings and *fake* funerals. We tapped into the *science of science*, healing and sanctifying the pretend 'ill', 'injured', 'wounded' and 'dead' through observation, attention, imagination, and practical application, giving the 'clients' our 'best' 'fake' treatments. Beginning such rituals from a place of ostensible fabrication (a child's game) allowed us to sabotage our existing knowledge, and to access new experiential information.

Contemporary dance has seen countless adaptations of landmark works in history, such as *The Rite of Spring*, carrying the past forward into the now. The practices and philosophies of our teachers, our ancestors, which inform our own rituals, are traceable far beyond their lives on earth, and ours. At any given moment, we are the present embodiment of the past, as well as the life of the future. Life and death rituals exist so that we can attempt to access and connect to the world of the dead and inherited, the eternally unknowable, engaging our memory to extend the life of the deceased, to reproduce cycles in time and space. Many embodied practices are preserved and carried on by others, with clear examples in dance history such as Trisha Brown technique and repertory [as I currently perform 'Drift' (1974) at festival *Le Mouvement – Performing The City*, in Biel, Switzerland (August)] and Ohad Naharin's Gaga Movement Language—as well as after a creator's death, with Graham and Cunningham techniques, and the pioneering work of Isadora Duncan.



The multifaceted ritual of dance is both a personal practice and one of performative sharing. The practice of any art form is ritual in itself, whether through daily creative processing, continuing a line of history through one's own work, or simply through the unqualified faith any artist has in his or her own practice. Today, we can witness a sense of transformation of ritual in the performing arts, to do with spectacle and spectatorship, as audiences are granted more imaginative responsibility. Lilian Steiner's recent performance *Meditation* acts as an inclusive experience, sharing her personal, improvisational practice – an inner, natural praise – which, in turn, transports each witness to a different landscape of *their* own meditative condition. The creative authorship of an audience in contemporary art today is paving a way for the invention of new rituals in live performance.

A class, training, warm-up or recurring ritual can be a subjective practice. In June this year, I lived at *Ponderosa Movement and Discovery* in Stolzenhagen, Germany, working with choreographer Peter Pleyer, who shared his personal warm-up score/ritual, created in collaboration with Esther Gal, which he does in combination with Tai Chi and Qi-Gong forms. This score is composed of 8 × 3 minute rituals of assorted practices, preparing for versatility and unpredictability in creating and performing: shaking, humming together, jumping while making a sound at the highest point of elevation, laying on one's back and hissing the exhale of breath, sharing heart energy, laughing, fucking the space and slow motion. Congruently, the *Deep Soulful Sweats* ritual (Natalie Abbott, Rebecca Jenson, Sarah Aiken and Janine Proost), which took off in Melbourne last year, combining yoga, dance, disco and aerobics, creates an unrestricted space in which to alter one's condition through a wild, impulsive group practice.

Symmetry and balance are key principles of healing practices and body concepts. We are *essentially* symmetrical constructs, yet, most certainly asymmetrical in our being. In many cultures, rituals are steeped in symmetry, through gestures of prayer, yoga poses, Buddhist symbols and the architecture of temples and churches. Notions of symmetry and extrapolated cubism were also vital to Western modernism. As Doris Humphrey famously proclaimed, "Symmetry is lifeless". In the many symmetrical shapes and forms of modern dance techniques, it is often skeletal and muscular *tension* that brings us closer to achieving these aspirational identities.

*The practice of any art form is ritual in itself. Can we exist, and be present, among that (all) which we are not?*

Hennessy introduced me to Maria F. Scaroni and Jess Curtis' *Symmetry Study*, a movement score in which the sole instruction is that one's body parts move symmetrically, again, *pretending* this impossibility is possible. Dancing 'symmetrically' shifts how we see the world, attempting to democratize body parts. As Jonathon Burrows said, "The body cannot escape the political, however vague"<sup>2</sup>. But can we really lend such equality? In performance, is someone's anus or armpit categorically as relevant or valuable as a limb, torso or head? In a group of men and women, balance is not created by equal numbers of both sexes. Can we exist, and be present, among that (all) which we are not?

Within a shared ritual, we don't all have the same experience, yet our experiences are not private. Do we capitalise on homogeneity or individuality? My Holotropic breakdown was a crucial part of the group ritual, despite my suffering. Joining a group of 'humans' in any given context, involves accepting an inevitable element of difference, exclusion or discrimination within it.

German anarchist Gustav Landauer said, "The state is a condition, a certain relationship between human beings, a mode of behaviour; we destroy it by contracting other relationships, by behaving differently toward one another"<sup>3</sup>. Perhaps the language by which we think of "us" fuels our ingrained critical thinking practices. Do we need to stop thinking of ourselves as personifications of the word "human", in order to reject the oppressive power of "humanism"? Instead, are we "objects", "animals" or "creations"?

Rituals are ways to access new knowledge, like love and art, set heavily in the imaginative and uncertain, and the fresh experiences they create are sometimes unfamiliar and frightening. Let us not forget the past, but at the same time, may we find our individual and shared voice(s) for the ritual(s) of today.

### Footnotes:

- 1 Spanberg, Marten. "Artistic Writing." Lecture, Workshop, Impulstanz, Vienna, August 1, 2014.
- 2 Burrows, Jonathon. "Writing Dance." Lecture, Impulstanz, Intensive, Vienna, July 1, 2014.
- 3 Hennessy, Keith. "Unsettling Modernism." Lecture, Impulstanz, Research Project, Vienna, August 1, 2014.

---

**Alice Heyward** is a dancer, choreographer and writer recently graduated from the Victorian College of the Arts, where she was the recipient of the VCAM Endowment Scholarship for Dance. Since graduating, she has worked with and performed for Timothy Walsh, Nebahat Erpolat and Becky Hilton. Alice has both choreographed and performed for Melbourne's Short and Sweet Dance Festival, ORGI at Conduit Arts, PAVE festival, Mudfest, and First Run at Lucy Guerin Inc. She has traveled to New York, Tokyo and soon to Europe, to pursue her passion for dance.

# MUSIC AS A SPACE OF POSSIBILITIES

John Rundell

**A rhythmic approach to music can also be extended to the rhythms of everyday life. John Rundell notes the mechanised rituals associated with modern social existence: we keep time, we check our pace in relation to others. We are early, late, rarely on time. On the other hand, the art of music extends beyond the everyday. It “increases the range of interpretation of human experiences”. In that sense, the space of possibility inaugurated by music opens out beyond the everyday, beyond the recognisable domain of human experience into the liminal. Rundell speaks of three spatial dimensions: internal, inter-subjective and socio-cultural space. We might say the same of dance, that its spatial (and contrapuntal) possibilities make room for something beyond the everyday.**

— Philipa Rothfield.

I. Like love, music is often viewed as enigmatic. Perhaps love in all its shades and music with all its tonal qualities simply go together as two of the great expressive, yet impossible media. Yet are love and music enigmas? Perhaps they are more than this – spaces of possibilities. The space of music is one of possibilities where creativity, communication, of the one and the many occurs. Music is polyvocal. It is also a space of dissonance and not only of harmony, where surprise and adventure also occurs. It is an expressive space, where we often make highly intuitive connections with ourselves and with others. This musical space of possibilities is not only a space of performance, of reception, of listening and interpretation that is of concern here, but also the internal space of creativity, as well as arranging, voicing and dancing in which imagining, feelings and emotions are forever and constantly present. This spatiality creates what might be termed a specific musico-reflective space where thinking, reflexivity and particular moods are created and performed, and in which multiple forms of interaction take place.

The history of music and musical forms, including dance, also suggests the continual opening of musical space, and the changes that have occurred particularly in terms of polyvocality and dissonance. In the social-theoretical tradition, Max Weber, Georg Simmel and Theodor Adorno are illustrative; but they are exceptions, and it is not simply due to what might, illegitimately, be seen as limits imposed by musical-technical knowledge. Each has something to offer – Simmel, because he explores the conditions of rhythm and melody, whilst separating them out; Weber because he realises and explores the importance of multiple voicing and dissonance, both of which for him, modern music cannot do without; and Adorno because of his emphasis on the freedom that is set loose once these occur, but which, at the same time, is curtailed. This short essay, though, is not simply one about the history of music or theorists or philosophers who have had something important or insightful to say about it. In looking at their work, I want to explore music not only as constituted through time or rhythm, melody, or social context, but as a spatial form.

Let's begin with some observations drawn from the work of the German social theorist Georg Simmel. Whilst music may not be an explicit point of reference for Simmel's reflections, his comments on rhythm and melody are of interest here. He places great emphasis on the changing rhythms of modern life, where rhythm is his self-consciously chosen expressive category. For Simmel, initially at least, rhythm refers to the general 'periodicity of life', the coursing of natural time – day and night, the changing of the seasons and the passing of the years. In other words, it is a stand-in category for a naturalised background sense of historicity. What might be termed 'the rhythm of life', according to Simmel, 'satisfies the

basic needs for both diversity and regularity, for change and stability. In that each period is composed of different elements, of elevation and decline, of quantitative or qualitative variety, the regular repetition produces a regular re-assurance, uniformity and unity in the character of the series.'<sup>1</sup>

In modernity, for Simmel, regular musical rhythm once abstracted and notated qua 'clock or metronomic-time', becomes synonymous with the industrialised, symmetrical pulse of the mechanised factory – of the time of work. Here keeping time is keeping the beat, of keeping the melody in check, of checking oneself against others. (Am I playing too slowly or too fast, or simply out of time? Or am I in time, or being conducted?)

Melody, on the other hand, for Simmel is reflexive; the tonal quality of song increases the range of interpretation of human experiences beyond the immediate rhythm of the day-to-day.<sup>2</sup> Melody, as well as syncopated rhythm, becomes symptomatic of a creative-intensive, sporadic expressiveness beyond and not derived from the everyday world of work, consumer objects and alienated relations between people, but the newly formed space of internal life, which for him is the basis for individual authenticity and creativity.<sup>3</sup> Notwithstanding Simmel's own quest and emphasis on inner authenticity that limits rhythm and melody, what is insightful here are the images of social and inner spaces, especially musically created and mediated ones.

II. We can explore this idea of musical space in a way that does not necessarily separate rhythm and melody but treats them within a combination of musical relations which we can term 'polyvocality', or 'multiple voicing' and we can do this by drawing initially on the work of the German sociologist Max Weber. He argues that polyvocality comes into its own with the development of counterpoint, and the way in which Bach especially experimented with it in his 'inventions'. According to Weber, although counterpoint is known in pre-modern times and non-Western settings, from the late 16<sup>th</sup> century onward it increases in range and sophistication due to the increased usage of chordal harmonies that in his terms 'think' two-dimensionally, that is vertically and horizontally. This means that firstly there was an extension and development of thematic range, possibility and density, and secondly the progressions occurred between several independent voices or instruments requiring harmonic regulation.

This relentless expansion of musical themes and ideas, which is at once polyvocal and spatial is also taken up insightfully by the German philosopher and critical theorist Theodor Adorno. He identifies this spatial dimension in Bach's music, especially, when he argues that 'the structure must be so conceived that the relationship of the voices to each other determines the

progression of the entire composition, and ultimately its form. It is the skilful manipulation of such relationships, and not the fact that he wrote good counterpoint in the traditional sense of the word, that constitutes Bach's true superiority in the realm of polyphonic music. It is not the linear aspect, but rather its integration into the totality of harmony and form'.<sup>4</sup> But it is more than simply a matter of integration here. For Adorno, Bach's work is illustrative of the attempt to work with the paradox of harmonic composition that organised itself 'polyphonically through the simultaneity of independent voices'.<sup>5</sup>

This idea and practice of polyphonic voicing neither begins nor ends with Bach, but is also a part of classical and post-classical music experimentation up to and including the present period. Adorno argues in a way that connects Bach with Schoenberg, that in twelve-tone technique, for example, 'all simultaneous sounds are equally independent ... [it] taught the composer to design several independent voices simultaneously and to organise them in a unity without reliance upon harmonic logic'.<sup>6</sup>

Alongside and even internal to polyvocality, the breakthrough and experiments with dissonance is of equal importance. There is a wild card which Weber recognises in his own analysis and tries to account for, make sense of, and integrate into his thinking. This wild card is the continuous and necessary tension between harmony and dissonance without which 'no modern music could exist'.<sup>7</sup> And for him, the seventh chord (and beyond) represents the permanency of this tension – to resolve it or not to resolve it. In other words, Weber's concern appears to be the formal structure of music; and yet the existence of the seventh is interpreted by him through concerns with concordance and dissonance, unison and multivocality and the ways in which melody interpreted as the spaces between notes, has been addressed in ways that avoid, or screen out, this unavoidable tension. Music, especially modern music, involves tensions between concordance and dissonance, unison and multivocality in terms of the formation of melody itself. For Weber, the penultimate development of musical modernity is the formation of polyvocality in the context of increased chromatic range and melodic sophistication once the 'irrational' dimensions of the third and especially the seventh come into play.

Several issues emerge once polyvocality and dissonance are brought together – is dissonance integrated and resolved? Or is it left hanging and 'worked with' within the context of polyvocality? If Bach, for one, emphasised resolution amongst his polyvocal experiments, as Adorno acknowledges, then the Italian composer Carlo Gesualdo, for example, resisted it, whilst Richard Wagner expanded it to the point where tonality nearly breaks down. Musical modernity sets loose a dynamic of experimentation and adventure in which polyphony is central and gives rise to plays of dissonance, especially, that are neither

decorative nor dysfunctional.<sup>8</sup> For Adorno, counterpoint and the polyphonic dissonances that it frees vertically, signifies the permanency of co-existences. Perhaps Nancy Huston, in reference to Bach, says it best in one of her fictional dialogues between two of her characters in *The Goldberg Variations*:

*'[The fifteenth], you've told me' is the Variation you love most of all – perhaps, indeed, the only one you truly love. Because of its chromaticism, that lovely word that bespeaks colour: the careful shadings of its notes; the phrases tranquilly ascending and descending the scale of G minor in half steps. Chroma means the skin – through what semantic association? You display us these variegated skins, the successive surfaces of something with no core. For what the variations repeat is not the melody of the theme, but the organization of its harmonies. There is no progression towards a climax, no revelation of an ultimate meaning – there could be a thousand variations, couldn't there? – and the empty centre would remain the same.'* (p. 88) ... *Instead of resolving on the tonic, it prolongs its questioning with three notes from the right hand – three notes still rising from the unknown.'*<sup>9</sup>

Contrapuntal polyphony with its play and disruption of dissonance brings to the fore the co-existence in voicing or instrumentation of independence, uniqueness and difference set within a frame of musical relationships that are held open and open onto something else.

III. In music that is spatially conceived and which has been discussed above in terms of polyvocality and dissonance, the pre-occupations become ones concerned with presence, co-presence, relationality, concord or harmony, dissonance or tension, emptiness and silence. In other words, music may be termed a 'space of possibilities'. In order to pursue this 'space of possibilities' I would like to suggest that music is a human creation conceived in three different spatial dimensions – an internal one, an intersubjective one, and a socio-cultural one.

Rather than drawing on Simmel's image of internality, we can draw on one derived from the work of the Greek/French philosopher Cornelius Castoriadis in which it is viewed as an outcome of the work of what he terms 'the radical imaginary'. In the wake of Castoriadis' reading of Kant, musical creativity, like creativity for human subjects generally is predicated on an 'empty space' filled by the spontaneous creativity of the radical imaginary. It is the capacity for creating meaning and representation where none exists prior to it. Music is not exhausted by its technical side – notation, arrangement. Nor can its creation be reduced to either biological or neurological factors. One cannot predict or prejudge what will be composed, how, or where, and in this sense, music is always a 'surprise'.

Yet, musical creation is not wholly autological or singular. Whilst, the songsmiths Rogers and Hart write that Johnny may only sing one note, principally because in this case he is tone deaf, nonetheless Johnny does sing with others, and there is always more than just one note. Music is intersubjective. It is built into its practices as something that is not only composed, interpreted in and out of the context of its traditions, performed and listened to – it also involves what Alfred Schutz terms 'musical communication'.<sup>10</sup> Notwithstanding Schutz's reduction of music to a Bergsonian notion of *durée*, or meaningful arrangement of tones that occur in inner time, his reflections on the practice of music are predominantly intersubjectively spatial, rather than intersubjectively temporal.<sup>11</sup>

Musicality and its practice is a space of communication in which the composers, performers and listeners (and they can often be interchangeable) creatively 'tune-in'. As Schutz states, this mutual tuning-in between composers, listeners and performers (each of whom are the addressees – even across the temporal and technological divide – rather than barrier – of historical time, of the recording, DVD, or download), is established by the often imagined "reciprocal sharing of the other's flux of experiences".<sup>12</sup> This shared flux of experience constructs an often imaginary present together in the form of the 'We'. Sometimes, however we have to 'tune-out' in order to tune-in – tune-out to others around us who are not involved, tune-out to the chatter of everyday routine in order to concentrate and tune-in to the musicality and the musical task at hand.

In addition, this task of musicality, which is a task of conveying meaning, is conveyed in both musical and extra-musical ways – through the playing and the deportment of the musical instrument, through facial expressions, gait, posture and gesture. Even across historical time, music is a polyphonic conversation within this musical space. Past works are reinterpreted, re-arranged, broken-up and re-mixed, as well as re-evaluated from the vantage point of the creative engagement of the present.

In other words, musical communication, more than linguistic communication, presupposes a simultaneous multi-dimensionality of interactions through which partners creatively interact. In this sense, music extends our expressive range and ourselves in ways that language does not. Language both structures and provides short-cuts. In this sense, language is a handy short-cut to communication. It runs along the surface. If we follow Simmel's insight here, musicality is also constituted through internality and depth in a way that language both cannot because it reaches its limit at the unsayable even in the poetic. To be sure, one way of exploring this dimension of unsayability might be to invoke the image of the imaginary horizon that constitutes all of musical



creation. In the light of my previous remarks this horizon is the ontological fact *qua* meaning. Yet, the sensory dimension of music that emotionally moves and opens – resides not only in the feet or in one's head as a cognitive experience, but also in one's soul, stomach and heart, is another aspect of unsayability. It indicates the depth, and not the surface of subjective formation and experience. When music moves and stirs us, it so often does in ways that words cannot.

Music evokes – we become involved, merged with the music, or even reflective, still involved, yet detached, thoughtful. In our involvement feelings stir, we become attentive, aroused. In this sense, feelings are neither cognitive creations nor secondary – they accompany imaginary creations giving them a sense of involvement and orientation. As Agnes Heller notes 'feeling means to be involved in something'.<sup>13</sup> In this sense, one surrenders oneself to the object or subject of feelings, in this instance music.<sup>14</sup> By having a feel for the music, by being involved in it we are also selecting and discarding what has meaning and importance for us, what has meaning and centrality in our life and what does not.<sup>15</sup> This means that there are many feelings – for there are many things that are important in more or lesser degrees at any given time in which we can be involved, and hence we have to learn to discriminate between them. In this sense and as Heller somewhat musically states, feelings are "polyphonic", and we learn them as a complex repertoire of feelings.<sup>16</sup> For Heller this complex repertoire of feelings and our capacity to learn to discriminate between particular ones entails that there is a hierarchy of feeling states, so to speak.

Moreover feeling or being involved occurs not only through direct and immediate experience; rather and more importantly it occurs through indirect and mediated ways that emit a gap between direct experience, feeling and thus sets our imagination free to explore this involvement further in flights of fancy.

In addition, feelings are directed outward, to the outside world, and hence connect us to the world around us. Feelings connect us to the world because they are also bearers not only of our selves and our imaginaries, but also of the world. They are value saturated, evaluative and we evaluate the world through them, and not simply by reasons alone. In this sense, feelings function as a bridge between the inner and outer worlds. They may enable us to *identify* whether a piece of music was composed from a religious, national, communitarian, universalistic or Romantic orientation or point of view, and thus help inform and express the appropriate emotional registers – grace, devotion, stirring passion, joy, grandeur, or sorrow and grief.

But the question still remains: Can we judge music? Perhaps the answer is 'yes' if judging is an interpretative, intersubjective activity. Adorno, for example, attempts to capture this intersubjective dimension of music, and by extension musical judgement, through musical reception. To be musically receptive is to be neither autological, nor deaf to its polyvocality. In this sense, the receptive quality of music entails that it cannot be reduced to the sense of its own creativity or its technical rules. It involves an openness to 'musical personalities', their passions, emotions, dramas and comedies. It also enables an openness to musicality itself.

This musical reception exists in music's own musicality in the spatial ways that I have suggested above. Rather than singling out particular musical genres, techniques or perspectives it is more accurate to say that all forms of music convey and evoke certain feelings and emotions, for example tranquillity, joy, love, discomfort or pain. Music creates and 'topicalises' aspects of the human condition in emotionally enriched registers.

Music is our anthropological gift – more so than language. *It is an outwardly directed and practised meaning saturated form of human expression which explodes in three-dimensionally created walls of sound. These dimensions include imaginary creation, intersubjective modalities of 'tuning-in and reception, where the full range of feelings and emotions are readily available.'* Perhaps, in the end, all we should do is sit, stand, dance, tap our feet – listen to the music and hopefully be moved and involved in it – whatever its genre and with regard to the feeling state that it evokes. In other words, music conveys the rich density and polyvocality of inner and outer life, and we can listen to this density and not turn away from it. Moreover, perhaps 'musical communication' is just like love after all – it's all in the expressivity as well as the composing, performing and listening; an expressivity that words can never fully convey. Music is the unsayable.

**Associate Professor John Rundell** is Reader in Social Theory and Director of The Ashworth Program for Social Theory at The University of Melbourne. He is an editor of the journal *Critical Horizons*, and the *Social and Critical Theory Book Series*. He has published widely on the topic of modernity, and problems of human self- images in social theory, with particular reference to the imagination. Recent publications include *Aesthetics and Modernity Essays by Agnes Heller* (Rowman and Littlefield, 2010); 'The Erotic Imaginary, Autonomy and Modernity' in Harry Blatterer, Pauline Johnson, and Maria Markus, *Private Intimacies*, 2010, London, Palgrave MacMillan, pp. 102-116; 'Re- reading Fichte's *Science of Knowledge* after Castoriadis: the anthropological imagination and the radical imaginary', *Thesis Eleven*, No. 119, 2013, pp. 3-21.

## Footnotes:

- 1 G. Simmel, *Philosophy of Money*, 1978, London, Routledge, p. 486.
- 2 G. Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money*, p. 487.
- 3 G. Simmel, *The Philosophy of Money*, p. 490.
- 4 Theodor Adorno, *The Philosophy of Modern Music*, trans Anne G. Mitchell and Wesley V. Bloomster, London, Sheed and Ward, 1973, p. 94.
- 5 Theodor Adorno, "Bach Defended Against his Devotees", *Prisms*, Trans Samuel and Shierry Weber, Cambridge, MIT, The MIT Press, 1981, p. 138.
- 6 Adorno, *The Philosophy of Modern Music*, pp. 90-91.
- 7 Weber, *The Rational and Social Foundations of Music*, p. 10.
- 8 Adorno, 'Bach Defended Against his Devotees', p. 143
- 9 Nancy Huston, *The Goldberg Variations*, p. 92.
- 10 See Alfred Schutz, *On Phenomenology and Social Relations*, Edited with an Introduction by Helmut R. Wagner, Chicago, Chicago University Press, pp. 209-217.
- 11 Schutz, *On Phenomenology and Social Relations*, p. 210
- 12 Schutz, *On Phenomenology and Social Relations*, p. 216
- 13 Agnes Heller, *A Theory of Feelings*, Assen, The Netherlands, 1979, p. 11
- 14 Agnes Heller, *A Theory of Feelings*, p. 17. This is different to Heidegger's version. As he says in his own inimitable way, *mood has already disclosed being-in-the world as a whole and first makes possible directing oneself towards something*". (*Being and Time*, Stambaugh translation, p. 129.) For Heller, unlike Heidegger or Schutz mood or attunement is not at the forefront of an ontologically motivated phenomenological investigation, but rather is, in her own more precise definition of it, is a "feeling that predispose[s] us to feel certain feelings rather than others, to feel certain feelings more frequently than others, certain feelings more intensely than others, more feelings more profoundly, others superficially", and may or may not last shorter or longer periods. In other words, for her at least, a mood is an emotional predisposition characteristic of an entire life. In many ways, Heidegger uses the term mood as a synonym for the more general term of involvement.
- 15 Agnes Heller, *A Theory of Feelings*, p. 41
- 16 Agnes Heller, *A Theory of Feelings*, p. 29

# Riyaaz as ritual connecting the sacred and profane in Kathak

Shruti Ghosh

*Riyaaz* literally meaning 'practice', in the context of *Kathak* dance, is a quintessential element which shapes a dancer and her art. It signifies rigorous practice, which enables a dancer to acquire mastery over her craft. But in the case of Kathak, the repetitiveness of *riyaaz* endows it with a ritualistic dimension as well, since "the ritualistic approach of *riyaaz* reflects the exacting method and training of the body within the rigid aesthetic and social structure of the *guru-shishya relationship*." (Chakravorty 2008, 98) *Riyaaz* is not only the repetitive doing of a set of codes, but more crucially, it demands complete submission of the student (*shishya*) to the teacher (*Guru*), who is mostly identified as a God. The unquestionable faith and adherence to the teacher renders *riyaaz* as more than just a bodily habit. *Riyaaz* transforms the dancer's body into an expressive body of the devotee, who is longing to unite with the absolute God. In doing so, it thus incites within the dancer both an experience and an enactment of the sacred.

The two significant aspects of *Kathak* comprising of *Nritya* (acting or interpretive dance) and *Nritta* (abstract dance) gives further keys to understand how the sacred is experienced through "a particular kind of embodied aesthetic desire" (Chakravorty 2009, 93). The *Nritya* or acting section calls for depiction of various roles adapted mainly from mythologies. Through a continuous switching of selves, the dancer plays several roles – both male and female, at the same time. She enacts as the Hindu God Krishna at a particular moment and the next, she poses as Krishna's conduit, the shy Radha. Mostly such enactments chronicle the narratives of longing of the devotee, Radha for union with her beloved/God Krishna.<sup>1</sup> A *paalta* or a quick turning of the body acts as a visual code separating the two enacted selves. The unfailing adherence to the strictures of the dance form nourishes the skill of the dancer who is subsequently enabled to depict the correct *rasa*<sup>2</sup> (emotion) and the *mudras*<sup>3</sup> (coded gestures) befitting the roles being presented. Through such depictions the dancer temporarily transforms and in turns transports herself (and audience) to another reality (mythic space-time).

In the *Nritta* or abstract dance aspect, the dancer exhibits the nuances of the *Kathak* movement vocabulary through the characteristic footwork (*tatkaar*) and pirouettes (*chakkar*). She explores the intricate rhythmic compositions lying at the core of the dance form and engages in a playful dialogue with the *tabla* player through *Jugalbandi* (duet) where they exchange rhythms. The sound of the ankle bells, crisp stomping of the feet, recitation of *bols* (mnemonic syllables) by the dancer, and the accompanying *tabla* (percussion) beats and notes of harmonium evoke an aural-oral dazed sensation within which the dancer immerses herself. The initial pain felt by the ankle bells tied to the skin give way to a kinetic pleasure and the dancer receives the most acute perceptions of embodiment which belongs to a dancing body. She dwells in a state of pure pleasure comparable to that of a trance experienced by an exalted devotee. She surpasses her everyday self to temporarily inhabit another self of dancer.

To sum up, *riyaaz* produces an exalted dancing body onto which the sacred leaves its mark; the devotee (dancer) journeys through a passionate path (practice/*riyaaz*) to unite with the God. But more interestingly, it is the liminality offered by *riyaaz* which sustains and sanctifies such exaltation. Between the dancer and the devotee lies a passage carved out by *riyaaz* (set of rules), which has to be traversed by the performer during *riyaaz* (repetitive performance of the rules) in order to become what she is not. *Riyaaz* as a body of rules and a process, emerges as a ritual, imperative in connecting the dancer's everyday reality with the devotee's ideal world. Following Schechner, it can be said that *Riyaaz* assimilates a range of activities from 'religious rituals to rituals of everyday life, from rituals of life roles to the rituals of each profession' (Schechner 2013, 52). It also presents itself as a threshold connecting the dancer with the devotee, the profane with the sacred. A successful attainment of the sacred necessitates the maintenance of the sanctity of the threshold, such that "the threshold itself is made to serve as an organising principle for the preferred mis-en-scene." (Bandyopadhyay 2009, 6) The threshold, or *Riyaaz*, both separates and connects the profane and the sacred selves of the performer, leaving at the end a scape where the boundaries become blurred.

**Shruti Ghosh** has a degree in Kathak dance and a Masters degree in Film Studies. Currently she is pursuing her PhD in Performance Studies at Macquarie University in Sydney. She has been teaching Kathak for some year now and has collaborated with Australian artists on various dance and theatre projects performed in Sydney and Canberra.

## Read More :

Bandyopadhyay Sibaji, 'The laughing performer', in *Scared to Profane, Writing on Worship and Performance*, ed. Anjum Katyal, Seagull Books, Kolkata, 2009

Chakravorty Pallabi, *Bells of Change: Kathak Dance, Women and Modernity in India*, Calcutta: Seagull books, 2008.

'The exalted body in North Indian Music and dance', in *Performing Ecstasy : The Poetics and Politics of Religion in India*, ed. Pallabi Chakravorty and Scott Kugle, Manohar, New Delhi, 2009

Schechner Richard, *Performance Studies: An Introduction*, (Third edition), Routledge, London and New York, 2013

## Footnotes:

1 Pallabi Chakravorty succinctly argues how the theme of longing and desire brought about by the Bhakti-Sufi traditions finds expression in the Kathak dance.

2 *Rasa* literally means juice. In this context, *Rasa* denotes nine main emotions which are at the core of Indian performing traditions. Each emotion is represented through a definite facial expression, physical gait and coded gestures.

3 *Mudras* are coded hand gestures mostly used in the acting section while depicting various characters. There are several dance treatise and manuals which give a detailed account of the functions and applications of the hand gestures. There are arguably a total of forty eight *mudras*.

# Ritual Cultural Policy

Ben Eltham

It was August, and the Australian government was launching yet another policy document.

It was glitzy, glamorous, and glossy. Australia's most expensive hall for hire, the Sydney Opera House, played host. Uncle Chicka Madden gave a splendid welcome to country. There was a live webcast (just as well, as I was covering it from Melbourne). And, of course, there were many speeches. The chief executive of the Australia Council spoke. So did the Arts Minister. So, rather unusually, did the Foreign Minister, despite her pressing recent responsibilities in Ukraine.

But what was being revealed? A slim eight-page document outlining the Australia Council's "strategic plan" for the arts in coming years.

Details were few. Dollar signs were non-existent. Questions were many. Who would gain? Who would lose? How much?

"Australian artists will be known for their expression, daring and skill," we were told on page five. "They will create experiences that enrich lives, locally and globally. Arts organisations will enable artists to achieve great art."

In places, the new plan veered towards satire. "We will foster experimentation and risk-taking in all art forms," the document stated, in po-faced tautology, "by stimulating artists and organisations to experiment in their artistic practice."

Meanwhile, tactfully but rather neglectfully, the plan omitted the most important recent development in cultural policy: the federal government's \$87 million cuts to cultural funding, including \$25 million slashed from the Australia Council itself.

It was, as Angela Conquet remarked when asking me to write this essay, a kind of a ritual.

The truth of her remark struck me immediately, even as I strived to unpick what ritual might mean in the context of modern public policy.

Like so many words that we use daily, seemingly innocently and entirely knowledgeably, "ritual" is a term often used and little understood. Rituals have abounded for all of human history, and academic debate appears to have argued about their meaning and definition for nearly as long.

The word itself doesn't appear in English until Elizabethan times, but that doesn't tell us much, as it is based on the Latin "rite" and may even have Sanskrit roots with the concept of "rta" – a notion closely tied to the Vedic notions of karma and dharma.

By the nineteenth century, rituals had come to dominate the early development of anthropology. As the respected religious studies scholar Catherine Bell reminded us, the elaboration and conflation of ritual with the study of religion became a central preoccupation of late nineteenth century thought. In particular, Frazer's *The Golden Bough* was astonishingly influential. Wittgenstein, just to take one example, was an unabashed fan.

By the 1960s and 70s, cultural anthropologists such as Clifford Geertz were building sophisticated theories of ritual based on the reciprocal exchange of cultural and symbolic meaning. Geertz, famous for his dissection of the complexities of Balinese society, was what we would today call a "social constructionist." He believed that rituals, by acting as vehicles for this symbolic exchange, actually created social and political institutions.

Geertz' idea of political ritual seems to me remarkably applicable to our contemporary theatre of public policy. He thought political rituals could be recognised by their function of creating political institutions and power structures.

According to Bell, "political rituals can be said to comprise those ceremonial practices that specifically construct, display and promote the power of political institutions." Geertz went further, arguing that political rites were the very way power was constructed: in Bell's elegant description, "elaborate arguments about the very nature of power that make this power intangible and effective."

It's a deliciously enjoyably way to view the sort of thing going on at an Australia Council policy launch.

The hallowed venue and presence of respected Indigenous elders helped to sanctify what is, after all, the launch of a glossy brochure. Other aspects of political ritual were observed. The presence of the Minister (in this case, two ministers!) established a link to democratic power; attendance is restricted; a certain decorum is expected. At the end of the ceremony, the glossy brochure was handed out, like a clay tablet, for the symbolic consumption of the arts community.

While they may never get a gig on the main stage, there's no doubt that in the arts, just as in infrastructure or immigration, our public servants and politicians have become adept practitioners of a certain type of theatre of power.

Before I wrote about politics regularly, I was a working theatre critic. I have always been struck by the similarity of political analysis to performing arts criticism.

While it is true, of course, that politics contains many ideas and concepts foreign to the practice of art, the assonances and congruencies are instructive. Examine at random almost any article by a Canberra press gallery journalist, and you will find many terms of art borrowed from the stage. Politicians are said to have a "script" (sometimes it's a "message" or a "narrative") and they are regularly judged for their performance, their diction and their dress. There are props, sets and costumes, generally from a cramped and clichéd vocabulary of everyday life: hard hats and forklifts, pie shops and aprons, spades and hi-vis vests. There are lights and stage cues; indeed, there are many more stage managers than you'd ever find in a working theatre. I was once told by a makeup artist working for *Lateline* about the time Tony Abbott's chief of staff, Peta Credlin, seized a brush from her in the ABC's green room, and proceeded to

personally take charge of his foundation.

But it is theatre, of course. The real decisions are taken elsewhere.

After the Australia Council launch, almost the next story I covered as an arts writer demonstrated a rather different construction of power.

A small record label, Melba Recordings, had secured a quarter of million dollars of federal funding, apparently without peer review or a formal application process. The grant was never announced and only came to light after a felicitous tip-off.

Melba Recordings is scarcely known for its worldwide fame; nor has it set any sales records. But it boasts perhaps the best-connected group of Australian elites amassed by any arts organisation in the country. In a cavalcade of AMs and OAMs, former ministers and cultural luminaries, the label was able to accrue a concentration of cultural capital that proved only too fungible.

This, clearly, was a different aspect of cultural power, the covert rejoinder to the Australia Council's glitzy launch.

The whispers of power are often inaudible. But there is a subliminal hum that we may catch, if, like Don Watson, we are listening carefully. The pageantry and colour of policy launches, no less than the unsbtle celebration of values such as "excellence" and "ambition", are in fact levers to influence perceptions, and structures to create power.

This is what we can see in so much of the public discourse culture and the state. It is what enables Melba Recordings Maria Vandamme to argue, with apparent sincerity, that her largely unknown label was "successful because millions of people thought it was important that Australians should be represented on the world stage."

Such alchemy is pursued at all levels of the industry pyramid: by the working artist explaining her career choice to family, by major performing arts organisations justifying their special status, or by arts ministers begging for their meager public stipend from the Treasury. Indeed, Melba is interesting mainly because it displays such a glaring contrast between its rhetoric of excellence, and the reality of its elite social connections.

One of the pleasant joys of ritual is, to quote the anthropologist Roy Rappaport, the successful transformation of "the arbitrary and conventional into what appears to be necessary and natural." And so perhaps we shouldn't decry the existence of cultural policy rites. They are, after all, a very important way in which, in a penurious but none-the-less identifiable way, artists secure their patronage from the state.

---

**Ben Eltham** is a Melbourne-based writer and journalist. He is a research fellow at Deakin University's Center for Memory, Imagination and Invention, the national affairs correspondent at New Matilda, and Arts Hub's industry columnist.



# On Letting Go, Authorship and Other Choreographic Matters

Tere O'Connor  
in conversation with Becky Hilton

## People find each other because of ideologies not because of place.

This is a partial transcript of a live conversation

**TO:** I didn't really grow up with dance. I both fell in love with it and began to really question it at the same time. Although I really loved dance, I thought there was a lot of sappiness and banality in its history. So, I had both respect and a sort of disdain for it, and all of my work seems to embody that critique - a love of it and a wondering about what it can do. In some ways, I've been setting out a research for my whole career that starts asking elemental questions about the form, trying to extrapolate information, which I might reapply and use as methodologies for making new work.

The first one, for example, was unison. I remember looking at unison and thinking - why is that so valuable? Why do people love it? And what is it? I've also looked at tangent as an aspect of development in dance; creating a value system inside of the work, that journeys away from perceived cogency. I've looked at other things regarding language and how language is re-situated in dance. What I was looking at in *BLEED* was a resistance to imagery, symbolism or signs in dance versus the engines of meaning creation that don't have anything to do with legibility or reading. What kind of ghosts or mechanisms can find themselves in the future of one dance or throughout a couple of dances? How do they make themselves manifest outside of things like theme variation or other reiterative qualities? I wanted to look at how dance holds information that is different from a more pragmatic form, such as writing or film - forms that really record.

The ghosts of the previous dances and previous moments in a dance are very powerful although they are somewhat difficult to assess and grasp, yet unexplainably important.

## *On Letting Go*

I've come up with a concept for myself in which I'm trying to make use of the poetics of dance in a functional way. I use an idea called 'erasure as construction'. The ephemerality isn't romantic; it is something I can actually use in the work, to shape it. I don't like the idea that 'dance is just ephemeral'. It is not; it is constantly engaging with potential futures and loss. It is a drama that is intrinsic, maybe in all dances, it is part of the DNA for me.

In my work there are layers of things being built up, potential futures and losses that I reweave in a way that, to me, is more choreographic than it would be narrative. Things accumulate in a way that is specifically choreographic.

## *On the Politics of Rhythm*

Rhythm is really crucial in the meaning of my work. I'm trying to write this article called *The Politics of Rhythm*. I see young people go into repetition and durational work. If you haven't been able to corral rhythm into some kind of potency, the work is just going to be on a continuum of stuff going down the river toward the delta. The shock value that artists are creating with their imagery isn't shocking if it adheres to commercial rhythmic modalities. This is an interesting thing for artists who work in time-based art to look at. I don't mean rhythm like 5-6-7-8. I mean like *RHYTHM*, the way that the time of a performance can be cut up.

I'm not necessarily dissing on duration, but on the overuse of it. Vanessa Beecroft sets up images of women, it is ostensibly about feminism, but that is not the most interesting part. She directs them to go through a narrative in their head. There is an activation of temporality in their head that the audience can't read. To me, this is an artist who is taking into account the importance of rhythm. If they were just standing there, it wouldn't be as enticing.

## *On Authorship*

I am trying to work on a sense of detachment. The thing is organised and then it slips away from authorship in an authored way. The thing is happening and collecting, then suddenly it feels like some of the hinges aren't there, and then it falls and comes back; it is something about the way that I feel on earth right now.

I don't think I look at my work as self-expression anymore. It begins as self-expression, and then it starts to become a dog that barks back at me that I have to take care of on its terms somehow. I'm not interested in foisting my knowledge or craft on people. I'm not in the congratulatory part of my career. I'm more interested in seeing what my work can become, what I call the ghost of the dance, that doesn't lay in its imagery but in the collective consolidation of happenings. The best example for me was when I was young and I would go to Merce Cunningham. It would be going very fast, I could see this virtuosity and then suddenly, something warm would come up from underneath and start taking me over. It was the total-ness of the dance, something that is accumulating that I call the Ghost. What you leave a dance with isn't the full dance, it's something else that has been created by it.

I have a hope, or a belief system about dance, that it can detach from singular authorship, even at the same time that I am controlling the hell out of the work.

**BH: Indeed, the same dance is a different dance for everybody, every time. There's that Clare Bishop definition of 'aesthesis' - an autonomous regime of experience that is not reducible to logic, reason or morality. There is space, in a dance, for all the things we don't share.**

**TO:** Yes, I agree. The reason my work continues to be movement based, is because I think dance *is* a document, it doesn't need to be revalidated through language. Dance does not have this need. You can see a dance and say - *that* is that person's novel, and I have received *that* information somehow. I think a lot of artists don't believe that. They put their work through systems that answer to outside validations.



Tere O'Connor, photo by Paula Court

At this point, I feel that the market and art have collapsed so much that it's in the DNA of the people making work. They don't even know they are making a concatenation of imageries. They are replicating commercial time frames, like an image of a car in an advert; the car goes really fast and then digitally slows down. All these kinds of digitalisations propose a lack of tyranny; a message that says there is no single answer, there are multiple arrival points. It's really an expression of a politic that should happen. There are no leaders or finalities or polarities, there is only a spectrum.

**BH: Maybe we are fearful of options or ambiguity, which would explain the current turn toward conceptual and minimalist dance. Concepts that play out don't really need to be done in a way and repetition is self-explanatory. It's a kind of reluctant authorship.**

**TO:** I think conceptualism in dance has been problematic. There are ways that artists and people who are funding art or writing about art, could advocate for what the real centre of the form is doing. Instead, they relegate it to other ideas that are "understandable", ways they can re-explain it. I'm committed to creating work that does not do that, and to talking about and being able to articulate what my experience with that is. Hopefully some people are in agreement with me.

I'm committing to doing this thing on earth, and every time I do it, to come back and say what can this form do? Not how can I get awards, but how I can go deeply into the work and not worry about being excellent or being a master. Parallel to that is my desire to create a

friction against people whose knowledge isn't advanced enough. People who foist information down on dance, as a barometer of their limits; I am very boisterous about that. I write a lot about that and I challenge people. I call critics all the time and say 'I don't understand what you're talking about, this is coming from a really myopic place, which might be ok for you, but you have a huge national voice and you can't write this.' I think that they erroneously think that a critique resides in their opinion. That is not critical analysis.

I have a bit of resistance to some work that is going on now, because there are a lot of people saying 'I am an alternative being'. 'I do things that are shocking or outside of the bourgeois'. People are still talking about that and it does not exist anymore. Even the avant-garde is an embarrassing thought to me at the moment. Someone like Tino Seghal who says 'Going to sit down in a theatre, that is from another century' - I'd say 'Idiotic youthful statements like these are from another century'. Inclusion and multiplicity are the politic.

### *En Choreography*

What is it like if you find the work by letting a stream of material pass, owning something by letting it go? Conversely, those things are ghosting back as memories. A viewer will leave having triangulated the work from a couple of things he or she remembers that they liked. They take away a whole different work than the one you've made.

**BH: I once saw this video of John Cage and Merce Cunningham being interviewed by a local TV interviewer in the Midwest in maybe the late 60s, and she asks 'So tell me about your work' and they try to explain it. She finds the lack of story or narrative very difficult. Then John Cage says really kindly 'Maybe you could understand it better if you thought about it more like it was the weather, and less like it was an object.' I thought this was such a helpful way to look at a dance; as something with inherent changeability, like weather.**

**TO:** In my work, even though it is abstract, there are moments that start to collect and move toward a kind of abstract narrative that I can begin to include. It is not a cloud of nothing, it is shifting and starting to collect towards something and then it goes away. Like it's part of a book sticking out of the mud, you only see that much of the book, and then it gets sucked in. You could look for its bookness but it would not be there, it would bring up this thing for a minute and then go away. The kinetics of my work are about the different modalities of reading that come up. Sometimes it is through a really 'pop' place and then it goes to other places where I might tell the dancers 'you're not representing human beings anymore you're just in an idea', so their intentionality changes. The modes of presentation and the juxtaposition can be more kinetic than the choreography or the dancing itself. I'm trying to work with intentionality as a layer.

I think what is really amazing that is happening now is that people are understanding that choreography can be applied in a lot of places. In our Graduate program we offer choreography to the architects. They can do a dance MFA coming from another discipline and I welcome

*art is a place where we gather together  
to be alone*

it, I think that it needs to be awakened in people. I've realised all these things about choreography that really should go out into the world of ideas, even as I continue to work with movement. I think that we are in a place of absolute inclusion, choreography can be rendered in many applications that aren't just dance.

**BH: It is interesting that we are in a place where there are so many different platforms for receiving information available to us. I wonder how the multiplicity, and complexity of that is influencing us?**

**TO:** Something happening now that is really resonant is a kind of new geography, which happens not in terrain anymore but in the atmosphere on the Internet. People find each other because of ideologies not because of place. That is becoming much more important than the delineation of country borders.

Art used to be other and it was bought and brought into standardisation somehow. I don't think there is a distinction anymore, like fashion is art. I think some of it is really, really great, but, I can't find a group of artists anymore, I don't think they exist. Everything is becoming completely standardised, and everything is moving together. I come here and it's like the same city as Paris, every place is the same place, except for the odd kookaburra. Everyone is moving to Brooklyn to become an individual and they all become the same individual, a flannel shirted, bearded, pickler. Everyone is buying into a standardised version of individuation, as opposed to finding it. The assimilation time between other to centre is immediate now.

**BH: Do you think some things can go further underground?**

**TO:** I don't think there is an underground anymore. I think there is what is called the *New Humans*, the people that are born as a 30-year old woman with Manolo Blahnik's on, with a Time Out in their hand, saying 'Lets go to an opening'. They have no background, they have no culture, everything is a brochure-sized thought and that is what is running the world right now. It's everything I see right now, like the Kardashians, it is very frightening.

*On Art and Being Alone*

Richard Serra said something that is so important about looking at art. He said: 'Art is a place where we gather together to be alone' and I love that. Everyone has decided to make these palaces of art where you come together to have your own experience, alone. It is a way of supporting the fact that you are alone, even though you are in a larger system than yourself. I love that about dance as well; there is no denotation in dance, there is no sign that means the same thing to everybody on earth. That is the most amazing thing about dance for me; it is really detached from the idea of the creation of singular meanings. People come to it, if they are not resisting it,

it is theirs and they are sitting next to a bunch of people who are finding their own as well.

*On Jenn Joy's*

When I was growing up and started to make work as a young person, I realised: I've got to really get behind some philosophy and to a place where long thoughts bring you to some kind of deep knowledge. I teach at a university, and I teach mostly grad students. The young people - I can make a blanket statement - are incurious and a long thought is not something they are looking for. Even if you give them a book to read, it is all about 'Do I get something from this, can I have this and put it in my house and get money from this, what is this thing?' There is no one saying 'Think about this for a very long time, and read other attendant histories around it and then come up with a thought'. They are basically saying 'Give me the thought'. Every country has the uneducated and they are rising up. Literally, people in the US are saying that university is a bad thing, that intellectuals are bad.

**BH: It's the same here. And I've noticed no one just sits and stares into space anymore, ever. No one does that kind of thinking. I think that watching a dance is a perfect time for that, for rumination. It asks for your time and for your attention.**

**TO:** In my work, I demand that the audience have to stay with it, it is not made to keep you going. It is like reading something; you have to stay engaged with the reading of it.

**BH: There is a conflation of entertainment and art. Art can be very destabilising and discomforting, and not entertaining. A lot of the time with a dance you don't know what you're getting, you might have a weird thought coming from a long way away, or a sensation that you don't want. It's a whole different ontology. I think that is its power.**

**TO:** For me it is. I equate it with novels. In my work there are a million trajectories; potential futures, losses and a lot of undeveloped things. On my blog *Bleed*, Jenn Joy wrote this beautiful thing called 'Secret Detonators'; she says that I'm planting things inside the work that may go off later, when you go home. There are embryonic elements that are there, and you might develop them and I might not.

Through 30 years of making dances, **Tere O'Connor** continues to explore and refine movement, gesture, and composition in his choreography. His *poem* and *Secret Mary*, which premiered at New York Live Arts in 2012, offered provocative deconstructions and reconstructions of familiar ballet, modern, and historic dance forms. He founded Tere O'Connor Dance in 1982 and has created over 34 works for his company. He has also created numerous commissioned works for companies including Lyon Opera Ballet, White Oak Dance Project, de Rotterdamse Dansgroep, and Zenon. He is the recipient of many awards including a Creative Capital Award (2009) and a USA Rockefeller Fellowship (2009). As a mentor and educator, he has taught at dance festivals and universities around the world, and is currently a tenured, Center for Advanced Studies professor at University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. An avid writer and researcher, he continues to seek ways to document systems, values, and thinking around the creation of dance. Toward this end, he created a blog <http://bleedtereoconnor.org/> with performance scholar Jenn Joy to show his creative investigations and process for *Bleed*, which premiered in 2014.

This conversation was part of Simone's Boudoir, Dancehouse's conversations series and was recorded in July 2014. Full version is available on [www.dancehouse.diary.com.au](http://www.dancehouse.diary.com.au)

Many thanks to Chloe Chignell for the transcript.

Read More:

Tere O'Connor and Jenn Joy created a blog documenting his process and creative investigations for *Bleed*, 2014. <http://bleedtereoconnor.org/>



*It is through ritual that we substantiate and  
subvert ideas within the flesh, and through calli-  
copes and repositioning these gestures we might seek to  
upstage the closed circuits of the concentrated body.*