

Re-membering(s): Being There and Then, and Here and Now

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Abstract:

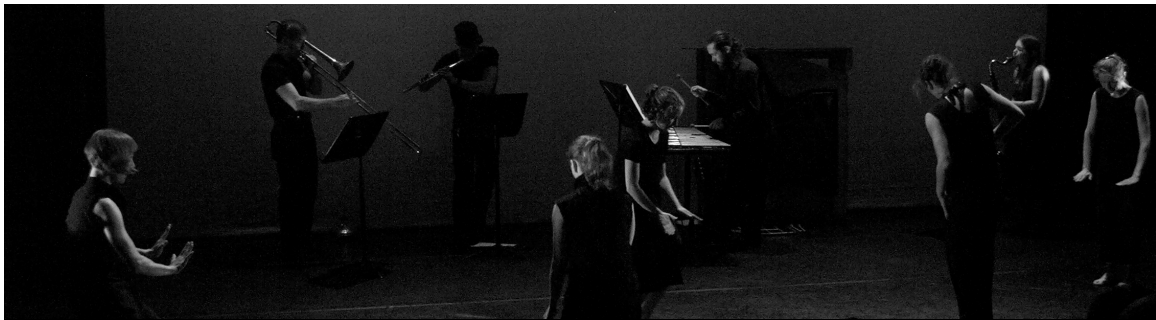
This paper considers questions of embodied perception, memory and cognition from a choreographic perspective, through an account of the making and performing of *re-membering(s)*, a performance work comprising a series of improvised miniatures in contemporary music and dance.

re-membering(s) investigates the interfaces between performers, between dance and music, and between performers and audience in live improvised performance. What is transmitted? What is lost? What are effective choreographic means to apprehend, frame and articulate the fugitive impressions and traces of what happens in the danced-moment? *re-membering(s)* emphasises the activities of looking, listening, remembering and reporting, engaging aleotonic compositional methods to present performance strategies and situations pertinent to an inquiry into embodiment.

This paper discusses aspects of the creative process and context of this piece, focusing primarily on the choreographer's and dancers' perspectives, and on the role of the interdisciplinary collaboration in the evolution of the work.

Background:

re-membering(s) is the result of a collaboration between my dance company, *articulate animal* and *the other ensemble*, a collective of Edinburgh-based composers and improvisers directed by composer Suzanne Parry¹. This work was performed at Dance Base, Edinburgh during the 2009 Edinburgh Festival Fringe, and at Woodend Barn, Banchory as part of the 2009 Dance Live and Sound music festivals in north-east Scotland.² The *other ensemble* performers were Parry (bass clarinet), Chris Greive (trombone), Richard Worth (flute) and Luke Drummond (broken piano, vibraphone); dancers with *articulate animal* were Lucy Boyes, Freya Jeffs, Skye Reynolds, Steinvor Palsson and Sue Hawksley.



articulate animal and *the other ensemble* in performance at Dance Base, Edinburgh.

photo: Ewan John

My decision to collaborate with a composer for this work arose from a previous solo work, *danced process #1*, which comprises either improvised or set dance-material, performed in a gallery setting while sustaining an informal quotidian conversation with the audience.³ *danced process #1* is performed without music, the sound-scape comprising the speaking voices and the ambient noise in the gallery. The piece intentionally lacks clearly delineated parameters of performing space, duration and performer/audience divide; this is aimed to provoke people into asking questions and thereby entering into the conversation necessary for the piece. This raises many interesting questions about performance. *re-membering(s)* began for me as a means to

¹ Suzanne Parry is presently completing a PhD in composition at The University of Edinburgh.

² http://www.dancelive.org.uk/performances_soundings.htm
<http://www.sound-scotland.co.uk/>

³ First performed November 2008, in the Sculpture Court of Edinburgh College of Art, as part of the Mphil/PhD *document* exhibition

address some of these questions, including the relationship of dance to music or silence. Both works form part of my ongoing practice-based PhD research at Edinburgh College of Art, which addresses and questions embodied cognition through choreographic and interdisciplinary inquiry, engaging enactive and somatic approaches to embodiment, and employing heuristic methods and action research.

Dance with music:

In laying the foundations for this collaboration Parry and I considered the many ways in which dance and music can act as partners in performance. Sally Banes' chapter title, "Dancing [with/to/before/on/in/over/after/against/away/from/without] the Music: Vicissitudes of Collaboration in American Postmodern Choreography" (Banes, 1992, p.310) summarises the revolution that occurred mainly but not exclusively within American post-modern dance. The legacy of this revolution endures in the mutability of the relationship between the media and the continued ventilation of possibilities for the sound component in dance (ibid, p.313). Rudolf Laban, among others, had already championed the expressive potential of movement independent of requiring music for inspiration in the 1930's. However, the collaborations between Merce Cunningham and John Cage from the late 1940's marked a paradigm shift for choreographers and composers. Cunningham considers the initial works in which he and Cage began to separate the music and dance as one of "Four Events That Have Led to Large Discoveries" in his career⁴; "...working in this manner gave me a feeling of freedom for the dance, not a dependence upon the note-by-note procedure with which I was used to working. I had a clear sense of both clarity and interdependence between the dance and the music." (Cunningham, in: Walker Art Center, 1998, p.20)

Similarly, for this collaboration Suzanne and I aimed for in- and inter-dependence between the media. We employed aleatoric approaches in order to create compositional spaces and situations that would engage the performers in problem-solving activities, defining 'climbing-frames' and 'worlds' within which the performers could choose and manipulate dance or musical material from 'tool-boxes' provided for them. According to Eco, such an approach "installs a new relationship between the *contemplation* and the *utilization* of a work of art...Far from being fully accounted for and catalogued, it deploys and poses problems in several dimensions. In short, it is an "open" situation, *in*

⁴ The other of the 'Four Events' being the use of chance operations in choreography, work with video and film, and the use of Life Forms software.

movement. A work in progress.” (Eco, 1989, p.23).

It seems to me that the ‘open work’ or ‘work in movement’, where a performance is considered as a process of emergence rather than as an object, presents a forum for addressing notion of enactive approaches to cognition. In such work the role and definition of ‘choreography’ is also brought into question. During a composition workshop led by choreographer Jonathan Burrows and composer Matteo Fargion, Burrows suggested that “choreography is about making a choice, including the choice to make no choice”.⁵ The aleotonic method of the ‘open’ work employed here actively engages the performers in the collaborative making of choices (or no-choices).

McKechie & Stevens contend that “collaboration in creative activities is something to be pondered to advantage” and, relating their ideas to Dynamical Systems Theory (e.g. Thelen & Smith, 1995) that “a collaborative ensemble is a dynamical system”. (McKechie & Stevens, 2009, p.93). In *re-membering(s)*, although Parry and I were primary authors in that we defined the parameters, all the performers were collaborators in the dynamical system and therefore can be considered as co-authors. In the concept of the ‘open work’, this responsibility for authorship also extends to and involves “the collective enterprise of the audience” (Eco, 1989, p.11). Eco argues that ““open” works, insofar as they are *in movement*, are characterized by the invitation to *make the work* together with the author” and that “*Every work of art...is effectively open to a virtually unlimited range of possible readings, each of which causes the work to acquire new vitality in terms of one particular taste, or perspective, or personal performance.*” (ibid, p.21).

Choreographic approaches:

The choreographic research and development process engaged a number of methods and exercises to generate movement material and devices which would define the contents of the ‘construction kits’ to be employed by the performers.

The dancers were asked to keep notebooks throughout the process, for personal reflection or to make written or drawn responses which were passed between them. The notebooks became an integral part of the process, particularly for the composer to gain valuable insight into the dancer’s engagement with the music.

⁵ Burrows, cited from my personal notes from a composition workshop held at Findhorn Universal Hall, Scotland, 9-11th July 2009.

Some of the initial exercises for the dancers drew on the practice of Authentic Movement⁶, which proposes commencing dance improvisation from stillness and silence. The dancer attends to inner felt impulses to move, and then follows those impulses into dance in any way she chooses (including the choice not to move), while witnessed by a partner. Mary Starks Whitehouse, founder of Authentic Movement, was influenced by Jung's notion of 'active imagination' and the practice is often employed as a therapeutic tool aimed towards revealing aspects of the sub-conscious self. My engagement with the practice focuses on its potential as a choreographic tool; I particularly value the creative freedom offered by allowing movement to initiate from any point of the body⁷, in any way, and with no requirement to move according to a specific intent, theme or vocabulary.

I am also increasingly interested in how the apparent lack of boundaries in the Authentic Movement approach which may seem likely to lead to formless movement, often in fact allows form inherent in the tension-patterning of the mover's body-schema⁸ to emerge in and through the movement. This in turn may implicitly reveal something of body-memory. Philosopher Edward Casey argues that, "A body memory works most forcefully and thoroughly when, rather than dominating, it recedes from the clamor of the present. As marginal, it belongs to the latent or tacit dimension of our being." (Casey, 1987, p.163). My aim was not to explicitly 'excavate' or analyse embodied memories, as might be done in a more therapeutic context; but it seemed to me that this improvisation process brings to the fore the implicit and latent body-memory dimension of the individual dancer's body-schema. The tacitly understood 'stories' perhaps coloured the resultant 'worlds' that evolved and were developed out of these improvisations.

After each improvisation, movers or witnesses reported on what they could remember of impressions left by the dance, using spoken or written word, drawings, danced response

⁶ In 2008 I undertook an extended period of mentoring in Authentic Movement with Fran Lavendel, a Senior Registered Dance Movement Therapist, teacher of Authentic Movement and practitioner of Body- Mind Centering (somatic education). My engagement with the practice focused on ways it could inform my choreographic practice. This was funded by Scottish Arts Council Professional development Fund

⁷ Various dance-artists have made claims that movement always initiates from certain 'energy centres' in the body: for example, Isadora Duncan focused on the solar-plexus;

"For hours I would stand quite still, my two hands folded between my breast, covering the solar plexus... I was seeking and finally discovered the central spring of all movement, the crater of motor power, the unity from which all diversions of movement are born, the mirror of vision for the creation of dance". (Duncan, 1928, p75), and Martha Graham, the pelvis.

⁸ I am using the term here to refer to the 'corporal-kinetic patterning' (Sheets-Johnstone) of the lived physical body. For a discussion on body-image/body-schema see: Merleau-Ponty, 2002 [1962]; Gallagher & Cole, 1995; Gallagher 2005; Sheets-Johnstone, 2009; De Preester & Knockaert, 2005; Weiss, 1999.

or tactile report. The exercise was repeated emphasising other modalities than vision; for example, the receiver closing their eyes and receiving verbal report given by the dancer during the improvisation, or tactile report given afterwards. One observation from these exercises was the amount and speed of loss of detail in our recall, despite the brevity of the movement phrases and the focus of our concentration on the tasks. Moments slipped from our grasp like grains of sand. We also noticed that our ability to make something of the scattered traces left of what had just been varied according to modality. Some of us were very visual, others (like myself) found that words and tactile imprints left a more lasting impression.

Dance and cultural theorist Andre Lepecki notes:

“It is one of dance studies’ major premises to define dance as that which continuously plunges into pastness—even as the dance presents itself to visibility...As issues of memory, history and visibility are brought to the fore, the notion of mnemonic trace emerges as a concept in crisis—a concept brought to crisis by the means of the dance. This is a crisis of the visible, of how to approach the visible body as its dancing presence plunges into the past, into history, into a representational field that is perhaps too excessive to be regimented, contained, tamed.” (Lepecki, 2004, pp.4-5)

This ‘excessiveness’ became a subject of the inquiry in this piece. I became very interested in the activity of remembering as opposed to memorising, and much of the performance played on the difficulty of catching, retaining and reporting the traces of the unfolding dance or music.

Some of the “construction tools” (Eco) of the performance were based on what the performers remembered of something that had happened recently, during the performance, or previously, during the R+D. The tacit dimension of body-memory was also perhaps implicitly brought to the fore by some of the compositional structures employed. Underlying this multi-layering was the notion that memory “is always at work: it is continually going on, often at several levels and in several ways at once”. (Casey, 1987, p.ix). One aspect of this performance work was the presenting of a multiplicity of levels on which it could be apprehended.

Performance:

The performance piece grew from these initial improvisations into a series of 'worlds', presented as miniatures, each centered on a specific quality of an individual dancer and developing through iterative processes. To illustrate this I will focus on three specific 'worlds'. The names of the sections arose from our own labeling system and do not represent any formal dance or music terminology.

i) "Pools"

This section evolved from a series of improvisations by one of the dancers in which she generated a quality and form that seemed to 'swirl the space'. Her presence was very strong — one of the other dancers described it as a quality of "purposeful release" — generating 'pools' of movement yet never settling in one space. There was a circularity, a richness and a denseness to her dancing that moved the air as she passed, and which seemed to leave almost perceivable traces. We used the image of the space as a thick soup, interconnected but with smaller vortices or pools being created individually and in which these trails would remain visible.

The ensuing task for the other dancers is to visualise these trails as 'snake-skins', as tubes of space to slip into and follow. Our movement vocabulary is therefore initially determined by the task of 'feeding' ourselves into a physical space, following the trace of another dancer's previously performed movement. By paying attention to the feeling of being in this movement pathway, the focus of the task then shifts from trying to respond to a vestige of what *was* to the immediacy of what *is*. 'Being There and Then' blurred into 'Being Here and Now'. This shift in attention in turn instigates new choices, to respond to the sensation of moving in someone else's pathway, or to the immediate presence of another dancer or musician, or the music. Further tasks include to "carry the sound" as 'sound-snakeskins' from place to place, or to take responsibility for leaving 'snake-skins' trails for other dancers to inhabit.

ii) 5-7-11

Within this section, the dancers' material comprises set, repeatable phrases based on prime-numbered units of time. A connecting thread running throughout the music was also the use of prime number tone-rows; prime numbers being chosen by Suzanne and I partly for the 'predictability of unpredictability' of patterns generated by them.

The dance material contains layers resulting from several iterations of the improvisation/reporting process; it again initiated from a specific improvisation by one of the dancers, in which attention was drawn to listening to the sound and tempo of her breath, of the ticking of the clock and to her own 'inner pulse'. It was a generous dance, with dynamic use of legs and centre, carrying and shifting the dancer through space. One repeated movement was a holding and pulling up of one side of the waist and pelvis (it subsequently transpired that this was the seat of an old injury), which I described in my notebook as "as if the skin has split".

Another dancer then wrote and danced a response to what she remembered seeing. Her notebook described "mountains and hills", "supported without support". Her movement response focused attention on this small hitch of the pelvis, continuing through the belly, and the legs. The patterning of the responding dancer's own carriage of the pelvis, with an easy drop and swing, was quite different to that of the dancer she was reporting on. The resultant movement, combining aspects of both schemata is a small, idiosyncratic move, almost the opposite of the original swirling, shifting dance. To distill and hold this curious, small movement I contained the reporting process within a one square metre area, and shaped the resultant movement material into prime number phrases of 5, 7, 11, and 13 count duration, each gradually extending into more planes and directions. As we performed these phrases, a machine-like pulse emerged, which was taken up and developed by Suzanne in her music. This in turn led to my composing three further phrases – 5 counts focused on swung arm rhythm, 7 counts focused on the arms rotation around the spine, and 11 counts focused on bigger leg swings, relating both back to the original improvisation and to the music.

In the performance of this section the dancers are specifically asked not to predetermine the order in which they execute the phrases. Their 'tool-boxes' contain the phrases, plus choices to be still or to walk to another place. They decide the next activity only when in the course of doing the current one. The aim here is that the audience will witness dancers engaging in a decision-making process. By having set movement-material shared by all the dancers, a sense of familiarity and stability is established for the audience, suggesting the potential for, and generating an expectation of, a predictable pattern emerging. Here though, with all the possible variations and outcomes being dependent on the choices made by the dancers in the moment, this expectation will most likely be thwarted.

This unpredictability and ambiguity speaks more of the rhythms experienced when in the street or in nature: the birds or cars rarely pass by in perfect unison.⁹ Composer Matteo Fargion, considering compositional patterns in relation to information theory, suggests that “patterns of predictability should be both predictable and unpredictable”. (Fargion, 2009)¹⁰. In the instance of this section of this work, it seems to me that the small range of movement choices establishes an expectation of predictability, which unfolds unpredictably.

Eco points out the relevance of the poetics of the open work in the intellectual atmosphere of “multi-value logics...capable of incorporating *indeterminacy* as a valid stepping-stone in the cognitive process”, because “it posits the work of art stripped of necessary and foreseeable conclusions, works in which the performer’s freedom function as part of the *discontinuity* which contemporary physics recognizes, not as an element of disorientation, but as an essential stage in all scientific verification procedures and also the verifiable pattern of events in the subatomic world.” (1989, p.15).

iii) “Freya’s web”

The relationship of dance and music in this section developed very organically. Suzanne had composed a ‘chain’ of music, but initially felt, on playing it to us, that it was unsuitable for the work. One dancer had a foot injury at the time of the R+D, so we were exploring movement that did not require her to travel extensively or jump. Her improvisational task was to follow movement tracks initiating in any part of the body, of 5, 7 or 11 count durations, within the confine of an imagined one metre cubed area. Her concentration in this condensed ‘stock cube’ of movement inspired Suzanne to reconsider her original composition by positioning the musicians at different sides of the space and playing it antiphonally. This in turn creates a ‘web’ of sound-threads which pull the dancer in multiple, horizontal directions. Her task is now to divide her attention between her own cube-choices, and responding to the pull of the music. Drawing on Edward Hall’s theory of proxemics,¹¹ the other dancers also position themselves as

⁹ In a previous work for students at the Scottish School of Dance, I used Hamish Fulton’s “Seven Days Walking and Seven Nights Camping in a Wood in Scotland, March 1985” to create a score for the dancers. Fulton records his observations during the Seven Days in the order of their occurring, so that there are repeated elements but the order defies regular or predictable patterns; the dancework was therefore, relative to more standard dance composition formulae, quite ambiguous.

¹⁰ Fargion, cited from my personal notes from a composition workshop held at Findhorn Universal Hall, Scotland, 9-11th July 2009.

¹¹ Hall, E. (1966) *The Hidden Dimension*. New York: Doubleday. Hall’s theory defines personal space, according to intimate, social and public dimensions, and to socio-cultural expectations and norms.

'anchors' in order to extend and alter audience' perspectives of the central dancer according to their facing, level and proximity.



"Freya's web"

photos: Ewan John

Listening-talking:

The performance opens with a recorded monologue spoken by one of the dancers which is played through while all performers wait and listen in stillness, and then repeated while two dancers perform a simple duet. The words were previously recorded when a dancer executed an improvised solo and verbally reported on her experience at the same time. This process of reporting-while-dancing draws on themes previously established in *danced process #1*, and relate to explorations and methods developed by Kent de Spain (in Albright & Gere, 2003), Simone Forti (ibid) and Sally Doughty (Doughty, 2007) among others, which focus on accessing and articulating the real-time experience of "improvisational awareness".

This opening device of the performance sets the context for an unpredictability to come—nine performers do not play or dance, while a disembodied voice speaks. In a later section, the dancers sit facing the piano while the four musicians play a quartet on the strings and keys of the broken piano, vying for physical and sound space, generating music and choreography as they play. One dancer then stands, turns to the audience and reports on what she has just seen and heard. The other dancers then dance a response to this spoken report.

To divorce attention from the immediate impulse of the music and to focus on a previous and mediated moment is incredibly difficult, perhaps impossible. However, the task aims to explore and reveal layers of time, to highlight the thinking processes of the dancers and to challenge expectations that the dancers would be responding directly to the music in a binary relationship.



photo: Ewan John

In the same way that this work opened with an recorded verbal report of a dance that is not seen, it closes with a verbal report and music response to a dance that is not danced. These devices pose questions as to where the 'dance' itself resides, whether in the actual doing or in Lepecki's "plunge into pastness".

During the R+D the dancers often sat and spoke about what they could remember of particular dance-moments. I became interested in the activity of speaking-to-remember, and the manner in which it seems to peel away 'layers' of self-consciousness and reveal an intricate dance of someone searching inside and around themselves for the memories. There were marked differences in the ways that different dancers utilised space to locate memories, and in how they would at times 'see' a disembodied image of themselves, at others times 'feel' themselves in the activity from an embodied perspective, in line with Don Ihde's phenomenological thought experiments of

'embodied' and 'disembodied' imagining of a parachute jump. (Ihde, 2002, p.4).

One dancer described her extraordinary synaesthetic experience during an improvisation of smells (pine trees, tomatoes) colours (greens, reds) and textures (ribbons play-doh). The description was so rich, and the resultant "small-dance" choreography of her whole-body speaking-to-remember was so evocative of the *experience* of dancing, that in the performance she simply sits and speaks about dancing. The dance perhaps resides in the whole-body gesture-for-speech¹², punctuated by the tacit dimension of body-memory in the body-schema.

In this instance, Suzanne was also inspired to write the most direct of her musical responses, which drew on the qualities described by the dancer. Ironically the link here between music and dance was therefore the most literal in the performance, but the dance was remarkable by its absence.

Conclusions:

This inquiry into embodied perception, memory and cognition engages choreographic, compositional and interdisciplinary approaches. The aleotonic methods employed for the process and performance of *re-membering(s)* and the resultant "open" work-in-movement engage all collaborators—choreographer, composer, performers and audience—in an active, dynamic system. Eco suggests that within certain "open" works, the subject of the work "is a background in continual metamorphosis". (1987, p.86), and emphasises the active role the viewer must take in choosing "his own points of view, his own connections, his own directions" and in detecting "other possible forms that coexist while excluding one another in an ongoing relationship of mutual exclusion and implication". (ibid). Varela et al. argue the "interdependency of background and embodiment" (1991, p.9) in their proposals for an 'enactive approach' to cognition.

This collaboration highlighted this interdependency, this mutual exclusion and implication, through a multi-layered exploration of time, attention, and memory, focusing on interfaces between music and dance, between performers, and between performer and audience, and engaging them all in "enactive performance".

¹² current gesture research, including by McNeill (1992, 2000, 2005), Goldin-Meadow (2003) and Kendon (2004) proposes that gesture plays an active role in thinking processes when speaking.

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