A Choreographer's Handbook

Jonathan Burrows

ROUTLEDGE

A Choreographer's Handbook

On choreography: 'Choreography is a negotiation with the patterns your body is thinking'

On rules: 'Try breaking the rules on a need to break the rules basis'

A Choreographer's Handbook invites the reader to investigate how and why to make a dance performance. In an inspiring and unusually empowering sequence of stories, ideas and paradoxes, internationally renowned dancer, choreographer and teacher Jonathan Burrows explains how it's possible to navigate a course through this complex process.

It is a stunning reflection on a personal practice and professional journey, and draws upon five years of workshop discussions, led by Burrows.

Burrows' open and honest prose gives the reader access to a range of exercises, meditations, principles and ideas on choreography that allow artists and dance-makers to find their own aesthetic process.

It is a book for anyone interested in making performance, at whatever level and in whichever style.

Jonathan Burrows has toured and worked internationally as a dancer and choreographer and is currently a resident artist at Kaaitheater Brussels. In 2002 he was commended by the Foundation for Contemporary Performance Arts in New York for his contribution to contemporary dance, and in 2004 received a New York Dance and Performance 'Bessie' for his work *'Both Sitting Duet'*. He has made commissioned work for many companies, including William Forsythe's Ballett Frankfurt, Sylvie Guillem and The Royal Ballet. He is a visiting member of faculty at P.A.R.T.S. in Brussels and is a Visiting Professor at Hamburg University and Royal Holloway University of London.

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Routledge
Taylor & Francis Group
LONDON AND NEW YORK

First published 2010
by Routledge
2 Park Square, Milton Park, Abingdon, Oxon OX14 4RN

Simultaneously published in the USA and Canada
by Routledge
270 Madison Avenue, New York, NY 10016

Routledge is an imprint of the Taylor & Francis Group, an informa business

This edition published in the Taylor & Francis e-Library, 2010.

To purchase your own copy of this or any of Taylor & Francis or Routledge's collection of thousands of eBooks please go to www.eBookstore.tandf.co.uk.

British Library Cataloguing in Publication Data
A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

Library of Congress Cataloging in Publication Data
Burrows, Jonathan
A choreographer's handbook / Jonathan Burrows
p. cm.
Includes bibliographical references and index.
1. Choreography—Study and teaching. I. Title.
GV1782.5.B87 2010
792.8'2—dc22 2009045595

ISBN 0-203-85216-8 Master e-book ISBN

ISBN10: 0–415–55529–9 (hbk)
ISBN10: 0–415–55530–2 (pbk)
ISBN10: 0–203–85216–8 (ebk)

ISBN13: 978–0–415–55529–6 (hbk)
ISBN13: 978–0–415–55530–2 (pbk)
ISBN13: 978–0–203–85216–3 (ebk)

In memory of Doreen Burrows
1931–2007

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Preface

One of my jobs is to lead workshops where disparate groups of people, coming from different forms of dance, are invited to sit and talk together about the act of choreographing. Choreographing can be a lonely business, and we have discovered within each group a delight in hearing what other people do. We have discovered that, on the whole, other people do the same as us – that the questions and ideas which preoccupy choreographers are shared across the aesthetic borders that sometimes divide us. This has contradicted in a joyous way the wisdom I have grown up with, which seemed always to be pitting one approach or set of beliefs against another as if it were the enemy: ballet versus modern dance, theatre versus abstract dance, improvisation versus set-dance, conceptual versus dancey-dance . . . We are constantly told that our art form is a minority interest, hard to understand and bad at communicating what it does, and yet I have witnessed in these workshops a passion that seems to be shared by many and is widely articulate.

The notebooks from these workshops are my starting point for writing this book, and the observations they contain which I have caught and written down over the years from a multitude of dance artists. Only a fraction of these comments make it into print, but the dialogue from the many has been an always-present force against which to measure my own prejudices. Underpinning all of this sits

the work I make as a choreographer and performer, which is my real job and without which none of these paradoxes, questions, opinions and observations would have life. The book has grown from, and reflects, the feeling and shape of my practice as an artist, and as such is a meditation upon that – but my hope is that through the various certainties and uncertainties of what emerges in relation to what I do will come something that can be of use to others in their own process of reflection.

In dance, we work now with a multiplicity of techniques: physical, improvisational, compositional and performative. The number of approaches open to us is unprecedented in the history of the art form. These questions which have motivated me are responses to having found myself sometimes overwhelmed.

How do we make this field of choice a friend and not an overwhelming burden? How do we come back also sometimes to a position of passionate ignorance, enough to choose something, instead of knowing everything?

Some people might ask, 'But can you learn to choreograph from a book?' – and they would be right to ask this question. No, the invitation is not to learn how to choreograph, but rather to go on doing what you were going to do anyway, helped by this, if at all, only in as much as it gives you something against which to argue.

Throwing this book down should be as fruitful as picking it up.

There are no pictures, because pictures risk setting in stone an image of dancing that would only get in the way of your own peculiarities.

Dancing / Principles

Dancing:

Let us begin with the idea that you know how to dance.

Training is only sometimes a bonus.

Principles:

I'm going to start my process of writing this book by finding something, a principle, which will tell me how to start.

The principle for the writing of this book will be as follows: write the book the way I would choreograph a piece of dance or make a performance. This works for me, because it takes care of my primary fear right now, the fear that I don't know what I'm doing.

We usually don't know what we're doing.

I could have chosen many other possible ways to reassure me, for one moment, that it's all right to begin.

It's hard to begin.

This is just one way of beginning.

Principles:

Deciding not to have any principles is also a principle.

Deciding just to dance, and follow your intuition, is also a principle.

The only question is this: whichever way you're working, is this the way you want to work?

Principles:

A principle is not a rule, it's just a way to take care of some of the decisions, leaving you free to do what you do best, which is to be intuitive. It's hard sometimes to be intuitive when you're overwhelmed by choice.

At the same time the idea that you can make what you want is a fantasy. You are you, and you can only make what you can make. 'You're going to make the piece you're going to make, whichever way you choose to try and make it.' This was said to me by the choreographer Rosemary Butcher. The trick is to find out what you can make.
From a conversation with the author, 1999.

It's just work.

Do whatever you need to do.

Principles:

I find it useful, once I've begun, to make a note of some other thoughts that might help me as I go along. This is what I thought:

Work for only one hour at a time and don't judge it for at least a week.

Make one part at a time and then put it down and start the next bit freshly. The next bit should start from where the last bit ended, but should feel free to go somewhere new. Each thought will suggest the next, and I will stop when there are no more thoughts.

Start at the beginning and go forwards. I like starting at the beginning because I like how one thing leads to another. Other people prefer to start somewhere else and put the things in order later on. It depends what kind of person you are and what kind of piece you're making. The difference between these ways of working is not as wide as is sometimes imagined. It's just a choice: how do you want to work?

Say the stupid thought. I borrowed this principle from the scientist Francis Crick, who along with James Watson discovered the double helix form of DNA in 1953. Crick used the following principle in his laboratory – that if anyone had an idea, no matter how stupid they thought it might be, they must say it.

'There was no shame in floating a stupid idea; but no umbrage was to be taken if the other person said it was stupid.'
Matt Ridley, from 'Francis Crick: Discoverer of the Genetic Code', HarperCollins Publishers, (2006) 2008, p. 103.

Francis Crick also said this: 'It's true that by blundering about we stumbled on gold, but the fact remains that we were looking for gold.'
Francis Crick, ibid., p. 76.

In 1962 Francis Crick and James Watson were awarded the Nobel Prize for physiology or medicine.

Principles:

A principle is a way to make a map where no map exists. The landscape is there already, but a map might help you decide where to go.

Entering the landscape without a map is also fine, so long as that's what you want to do.

Principles:

There are not that many ideas. It might take you a while to find one, but it's worth the wait. Sometimes you only realise it's an idea after you've found it.

Principles:

This is not the best way to work, it's just a way to work.

Principles:

If it doesn't work, drop it.

Material

Material:

What do we mean when we use the word 'material'?

Material:

The performer I choose to work with is the first and most important material of a dance piece. Everything that happens is bound by that choice. Who did I choose and what can they do? Working with myself is no exception; in fact working with myself I can fool myself even more easily into thinking I can do anything. I can't do everything. So my question is this: what can I do?

'The best way to collaborate is to choose the right person to collaborate with, and then trust them implicitly.' This was said to me by the composer Kevin Volans.
From a conversation with the author, 1993.

(See also 'Collaboration' and 'Hierarchies'.)

Material:

In dance we often use the word 'material' to describe individual movements or short sequences found by a process of improvisation, which are then placed each in relation to the

other to create a choreography. This places the emphasis on movement itself. It can be a very good way to work.

Another way of looking at it might be this: that 'material' is what happens in the gap between two movements. This puts the emphasis on composition, on the placing of two things in relation to each other.

Placing things in relation to each other utterly changes them.

(See also 'Continuity' and 'Relation'.)

Material:

Accept what comes easily. I will add that principle to my principles for writing this book. Accepting what comes easily means trusting that everything is changed by what it stands next to, and that that is something I have to discover but cannot necessarily control.

Habits

Habits:

Are you doing what you want to do, or are you following your habits?

Maybe following your habits is the right thing to do?

Habits:

Habits are the things you do which have been repeated so often that their action is rendered unconscious, and the meanings and feelings attached to them become less visible to you. One way to approach your habits might be to try consciously to break them, or push them away. Another approach, however, might be to try to render them visible again, enough that the meanings and feelings are rediscovered and what has been taken for granted is cherished.

Try making a piece using only your habits.

Habits:

The paradox is that when I accept that all I can do is the old ideas, the habits, then I relax, and when I relax then without thinking I do something new.

(See also ‘Technique’.)

Repetition

Repetition:

Repetition is a device to emphasise or erode something by showing it more than once.

From the choreographer Meg Stuart: 'What's characteristic of my work is a kind of suspension or extension of time. To see an image and then to re-see it, to experience it more than once, to go beyond the first impression so that it becomes something completely else to you than it was when it first flashed by.'
Meg Stuart interviewed by Jonathan Burrows, 'Conversations With Choreographers', South Bank Centre, 1998, p. 7.

It is a moment of recognition for the audience in a sea of change.

Or, from a workshop in London: 'Repetition is sometimes useful in building the necessity for a change.'
Martina La Ragione, Choreoroam workshop, The Place Theatre, London, 2008.

Repetition also arrives at rhythm.

Repetition:

The composer Morton Feldman told this story: 'Samuel Beckett, not in everything he does, but in a lot of things he does. He would write something in English, translate it into French, then translate that thought back into the English that conveys that thought . . . There's something peculiar. I can't catch it. Finally I see that every line is really the same thought said in another way. And yet the continuity acts as if something else is happening. Nothing else is happening.'
From Morton Feldman's 'Darmstadt Lecture', 'Morton Feldman Essays', edited by Walter Zimmerman, Beginner Press, 1985, p. 185.

(See also 'Continuity'.)

This is another example of a principle for working.

Repetition:

When you repeat a material try changing it on two parameters.

This is a trick to make the audience care what happens next (see also 'Expectation').

If your material was to jump, the repeat could change direction, bend low and jump.

'It's hard to find a reason to jump.' This was said to me by the choreographer Tom Roden.
Hothouse workshop, The Place Theatre, 2004.

Sometimes it's hard to find a reason to dance at all.

Repetition:

(See also 'Rate of change'.)

Repetition

The Queen of the Belgians

Commemorating Astrid's death
The Belgians made a postage stamp
That my father prized, for her face
Like my mother's, Thirties-beautiful,
Serene around its edges.

I've got it in my album now,
A thing handed down, like advice,
For me to find in the face
Of a queen at Europe's edge
What it was my father found.

Queen Astrid, that my father
Put in an album for her face,
Is puffed into my thoughts by love.
It stands there like the heart of all I know.
I am the age my father was.
Douglas Dunn
From 'New Selected Poems 1964–2000',
Faber and Faber Limited, 2003, p. 12.

I like to think that Douglas Dunn worried easily away at this image of Queen Astrid's face, bringing it up again and again in each verse, turning it this way and that until he

landed unexpectedly on what he could never have imagined he was looking for – the realisation that he is turning into his father. Had he, of course, set out to reach that conclusion, he may never have got there. This unmechanical repetition, newly thinking the thought each time it reoccurs, slowly heightens the meaning that is emerging. When the poem finally takes an unexpected turn into the culminating image of the poet as his father, this image is amplified by a chorus of Queen's faces.

The first post-modern dance I saw was '*Gestures in Red*', a solo made by another Douglas Dunn, this time the choreographer from New York.
Douglas Dunn, 'Gestures in Red' (1975), Dance Umbrella Festival, Riverside Studios, London, 1978.

Sometimes I think every piece I've made has been an attempt to recreate his solo, over and over again.

What performance changed everything for you, and why?

Repetition

From 'Cheap Lecture'

We are
slowly
going
forwards to the
end, and
each
idea that
easily
arises
suggests the
next
idea:
repetition
here is
limited to

occasional
words and
phrases or the
echoes of
ideas.
These represen-
tations
when they

occur are a
device to
heighten or
erode an
image as it
passes.

They are a
moment of
recognition for the
audience in a
sea, in a
sea of
change.

The pleasures of the
familiar can
guide us through
any landscape
including the
landscape of
language.

Pattern is what
allows me to
recognise your
face in a
crowd and for
you to recognise mine.

When we
speak in
unison you are

hearing the
same thing
twice
simultaneously,
which
reveals small
differences
in our
voices
and
personalities

The size of a
nose or the
folds of a
chin are
amplified
precisely in
relation to the
similarities we
identify in the
face we are
studying.
*
*
The smaller the

degree of
difference in a
field of
activity the
more we

perceive what is
different.

We are
slowly going
forwards to the
end, and each
idea that easily
arises suggests the
next idea

Repetition is a
device to
intensify or
erode something by
showing it more than
once.

Replication of a
phrase of
music can
arrive at a
rapturous
longing for
more.
A melody heard
often enough can
arrive at a
heightened
meaning that has
passed through
boredom into a
state of
grace.

The return of a
theme alters
everything.
Words
repeated
arrive
eventually at
incantation and
movement when
looped
solidifies itself into
something that
hovers between
marching and

abandon.
Repetition is
one way of
arriving at
rhythm.
*
We are
now a
little after the start of the
penultimate
part of the
piece
*
We are
moving
slowly
forward

towards the
end and

each idea that
easily
arises
suggests the
next
idea which is
sometimes a
word or a
phrase or the
imprint of a
thought that we have
heard
before.
Repetition.

Repetition is a
device to
emphasise or
erode something by
showing it
more than
once, more than
once. It's a
moment of
recognition for the
audience in a
sea of
change.

The pleasures
of the
familiar can
guide us through
any landscape
including the
landscape of
language.

Replication of a
phrase of
music can
arrive at a
rapturous
longing for
more.

We
wish for
more
only because we
know it will
stop

*
eventually. Our
longing for
more is in
direct proportion to the
expectation we
have that
things will eventually
change. We

recognise a
difference between a
repetition that is only
filling time and a
repetition that

resists
deliciously our
desire for the
new,
without us
ever
feeling bored or
frustrated.
*
*
*
*
*
*

The repetition of a
melody or a
sentence can
pass through
boredom into a
state of
grace.

Movements
looped
solidify them-
selves into

something that
hovers between
marching and

flight.
Words
repeated arrive
eventually and
irresistibly at
prayer.

When we
speak in
unison you are
hearing the
same thing
twice
simultaneously
which
reveals small
differences in our
voices and
personalities.
*
*

The size of a
nose or the
folds of a
chin are
amplified in our
perception because a
face is a

thing so
recognisable that the
smallest
imperfection stands
out like
punctuation.
The smaller the

degrees of
difference in a
field of
activity, the
more we
perceive what is
different.

Repetition is
useful
sometimes in
building the
necessity for a
change.
Repetition.

Repetition is
also a
way to
arrive at
rhythm.

From 'Cheap Lecture' by Jonathan Burrows and Matteo Fargion, commissioned by Cultureel Centrum Maasmechelen and Dans in Limburg, 2009.

'*Cheap Lecture*' is a rhythmic spoken performance with music, which borrows its structure from John Cage's '*Lecture On Nothing*'. The shape of the text above is a visual image of the rhythm of the words when spoken, and each line represents a beat. The gaps between printed words suggest the flow or hesitation in our speaking, and an asterisk is a counted pause.

The unusual layout of the text is the product of a pleasurable negotiation with the given form, which causes us to speak fast or slow in the wrong places and place emphasis on the wrong syllables. When it works, this wrongness makes you prick up your ears just when your ears had felt like giving up.

In the performance of '*Cheap Lecture*' these words are accompanied by music, much of it borrowed from Schubert, and 139 slide projections of counterpointed words and phrases. At the end Matteo plays a grand piano and we wave our arms and shout.

(See also 'Form' and 'Scores'.)

Improvisation / Cut and paste / Choreography

Improvisation:

Improvisation is one way to work. For some, in some instances, it brings freedom: the freedom to follow impulse and the intelligence of the moment, the freedom to arrive at the right parameters for the structure of that moment without binding it with formality, the freedom to work at the speed of a thinking body and mind.

Improvisation:

This freedom is also there, sometimes, in set forms: the freedom not to be responsible for making a choice, the freedom to deviate because I have something to deviate from.

Improvisation:

Improvisation can be a principle for performing. This is an approach to making performance that demands as much focus, clarity of intention, process, integrity and time as any other process. If choreography is about making decisions – or about objects placed in relation to each other so that the whole exceeds the sum of the parts – or about a continuity of connection between materials – then improvised performance is as much of a choreographic act as any other

approach, the decisions are just made faster. For some people this is the right and only way for them to work. For some pieces this is the right and only way for them to work.

The question is this: what is the right way to work for the thing that you want to do?

What can you do, at this moment, in this process?

What will be gained and what will be lost in the way you choose to work?

There will be loss.

All of these questions can be asked even if you don't know what you're trying to do. So long, that is, that you know you don't know what you're trying to do.

It's ok not to know what you're trying to do.

Improvisation:

Improvisation can also be a way to work towards finding material that will be structured or set in the final piece.

Working this way can produce a lot of material very fast. It isn't, however, always easy to know how to use what you find.

My picture looks like this: I improvise and find myself in the middle of a complexity beyond my ability to grasp; I am flying. I try to recreate that moment, using my memory or video, but it's never the same – either I must improvise or

I must accept that I can only find back 70% of the complexity.

70% of the complexity may be enough.

There is, embodied within the form of Tai Chi, the idea that you use only 70% of your capacity and force. The missing 30% is the space within which your body has room to develop.

Many great pieces grow from processes which accept that what is lost leaves room for something else to arrive.

Cut and paste:

The use of improvisation as a tool to find material is intimately linked to that kind of choreographic process which finds things first and then decides the order to put them in. Let's call this process 'cut and paste'. It's a very good way to work for many people.

Cut and paste is perhaps the most effective way to deal with fragments found by improvising. We improvise to find the strongest movements and then use cut and paste to put them together – we develop skills of cutting and pasting which draw us back each time to improvisation as a primary tool to find material. It is a practice that can trap us into thinking this is the only way to work.

Improvisation is one way to find material.

Improvisation is not the only way to find material.

Cut and paste is not the only way to choreograph.

Try also not improvising.

Improvisation:

Improvisation is a negotiation with the patterns your body is thinking.

Choreography:

Choreography is a negotiation with the patterns your body is thinking.

Form

Form:

Form can be both a limit and liberation.

The form your piece takes is a strong influence on the movement you can make.

'But surely this is *precisely* the function of "form in the traditional sense" that serendipity provided by negotiation with a resistant medium.'
The poet Michael Donaghy, from 'Wallflowers',
The Poetry Society, 1999, p. 19.

'The grammatical system sits hard and fast as rocks on top of the waterfall, giving shape and order to the rapid torrent of water': an image, from the linguist John Maher, of the relationship between the rules of grammar and the unbounded riches of language.
John Maher, from 'Chomsky For Beginners',
Icon Books Ltd, 1996, p. 65.

Form is something against which to push your imagination free.

Exploration / Risk

Exploration:

Am I exploring writing this book? Or am I writing this book? I don't want what I'm doing to be just a test, a practice run for something that will happen later. I want it to happen now.

So I'd like to make a new principle, to add to my list of principles for trying to write this book.

The new principle is this: 'no exploration, only work'.

This doesn't, of course, mean that I won't explore things.

Risk:

I wish I didn't have to risk everything every time.

But then again, I console myself with the thought that if I didn't wish that, then I would have nothing to risk.

Risk:

It's only a stupid dance.

Subject / Inspiration / Stealing / Familiar movement / Choreography / Referencing other sources / Self-expression

Subject:

If I have a subject I want to pursue and I want to show it in movement, then I had better find the right language to say it.

It's very easy, when we know what we want to say, to fool ourselves into thinking we're saying it.

Faced with movement, the first subject the audience see is 'movement'.

What can movement say?

Subject:

Is movement the right medium for me to work with? Then again, if I also use other mediums will they clarify and enrich what I'm doing, or will they confuse and clutter the picture?

Subject:

What can dance do?

What can't dance do?

Dance can't do everything

Subject:

An idea in my head is real. It is, however, only a real idea, and not a real dance or performance. To make a dance or performance you have to deal with the reality of a dance or performance, and not with the reality of an idea. That doesn't mean ideas aren't good: ideas are good, so long as we know they're ideas, and don't fool ourselves into thinking they are the finished piece.

A motif or theme is more or less another idea in the head.

Inspiration:

Inspiration is useful if you can get it, but working is more useful.

Stealing:

Stealing is useful so long as you know you're stealing.

What you make probably won't look like what you've stolen, but if it does the audience will know. In that case for them what's stolen will become the primary subject, the thing they see first and most strongly, and what you make may be weakened by it.

Usually when you steal something consciously it looks nothing like the thing you've stolen.

Stealing:

Stealing from yourself is also a useful strategy, so long as you're not bored yet by what you steal.

Trust your boredom.

Familiar movement:

Sometimes recognisable movement frees the audience from having to work out what they're seeing, enough that they notice more important things.

Sometimes, however, recognisable movement becomes a subject so strong – for instance the subject 'contemporary dance', or 'ballet' – that we don't notice anything else at all.

What do you want us to notice?

Subject:

If I begin my movement by a formal entrance, followed by the traditional dancer's stance of parallel feet, then the audience will see the subject 'contemporary dance'. The subject 'contemporary dance' is fine, if that's what I want.

As an audience we take up the first and strongest things that come in our direction and they quickly become the subject. As makers we had better try to figure out what those first and strongest things are that we're giving to the audience, and which may not always be so visible to us (see also 'Contract').

At times the audience can only see our overwhelming desire to communicate. This is a common but accidental subject of many performances. (see also 'Formal elements' and 'Distracting the self').

Choreography:

Sometimes choreography is useful only in as much as we don't notice it.

This came up in a workshop in Sydney: 'How do you organise something so the organisation doesn't become the subject?'
Lee Wilson, Space For Ideas workshop, Sydney, 2005.

On the other hand 'choreography' can be a very good subject.

Referencing other sources:

If you choose to work with material which references other sources, do you want the audience to stop at the reference or do you want it to point them towards something more open or ambiguous?

Is the reference visible, and if so is it meant to be?

A reference which stops us at itself is, on occasion, exactly what you might need.

The reference will not do your work for you, but if you use it for the right reasons in the right context then it might do the work which you want it to do.

Self-expression:

If my subject is myself, then I had better find a way to see, best I can, what someone else might see of myself, because I am too familiar with myself to see anything.

Sometimes things familiar to you are what you need most, but they're so much a part of you that you can't see them and don't value them.

'The aspects of things that are most important for us are hidden because of their simplicity and familiarity. (One is unable to notice something – because it is always before one's eyes.)' Ludwig Wittgenstein.
Extract from paragraph 129 of 'Philosophical Investigations', Blackwell Publishers Ltd, (1953) 1999, p. 50.

Finding a technique to get perspective on the 'too familiar' is what is useful about the following things: principles for working, structure, concepts, choreography, or all the other ways to work that seem counter-intuitive to the act of personal expression.

Our job as choreographers is to stay close enough to what we're doing to feel it, and at the same time use strategies to distance ourselves enough to grasp momentarily what someone else might perceive.

Another description of choreography could be this: 'Something that helps you step back for a moment, enough to see what someone else might see.'

Self-expression:

'I have no desire to prove anything by it. I have never used it as an outlet or as a means of expressing myself. I just dance.'
Fred Astaire, from 'Steps In Time', HarperCollins Publishers, (1959) 2008, p. 325.

The fact that it feels and looks like self-expression doesn't necessarily mean that's how it was made.

Self-expression:

It's about what the audience see, not about what we feel (that doesn't mean we don't feel).

Self-expression:

The American philosopher of art Susanne K. Langer wrote a book in 1953 called '*Feeling And Form*' in which she tried to identify a quality to each art form, something which underpins and defines the manner in which it operates. Miraculously, she included two chapters on dance, in which she articulated the underlying dilemma and force of the art form as follows:

'It is *actual movement*, but *virtual self-expression*.'
Susanne K. Langer, 'Feeling and Form', Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd, London, (1953) 1979, p. 178.

She also said this: 'No art suffers more misunderstanding, sentimental judgement, and mystical interpretation than the art of dancing.'
Ibid. p. 169.

(See also 'Space or place?')

Self-expression:

Do I need to express something or am I already expressing it?

Subject:

In the end you have to choose something to work with which you care about, and then play with it as freely as though it were just an exercise.

An exercise alone won't be enough.

Subject:

When you see what you want you'll recognise it, but it won't be entirely yours, it will belong to the material you've trusted. You may have to try a lot of principles that arrive at a lot of possible materials, before you experience this recognition.

Working and then throwing things away is still working. There are always more possibilities. One of them will be the one you'll recognise.

Contract / Performance space / Language / Choreography

Contract:

The first things the audience see when a performance begins form a contract. This contract teaches the audience how to read the performance, at the same time as the performance is unfolding.

The contract is the key to understanding the continuity that holds and gives sense to the piece. This is as true of an abstract piece as of a narrative piece.

When a piece makes sense to us it appears to reach a point where we would accept anything that happens. The continuity of unfolding objects has set up a series of clues which teach us how to read, anticipate, recognise and be surprised by what follows.

Sometimes, however, a piece takes a turn that drops the continuity in the wrong way, and we lose interest.

This doesn't mean that a piece can't subvert our expectations.

Constantly subverting our expectations also arrives at continuity.

Contract:

The idea of a contract with the audience came to me from the choreographer Martin del Amo, during a workshop in Sydney. He said this: 'You're giving the tools, you're teaching the language at the same time as you're using it.' Later, and quite by chance, we found a perfect example in his own solo.
Space For Ideas workshop, Sydney, 2005.

At the start of the dance Martin entered wearing underpants and carrying a pair of high heel shoes. When he got to the centre of the stage he put them on and began a slow turning dance, while his arms escalated in ever increasing whirls of complexity until his whole body was overwhelmed. He never left the spot. At the end he took the shoes off and walked with dignity back out of the space.

By carrying his shoes into the space Martin established a contract with us that told us clearly from the beginning that once he put the shoes on he would not move again. This released us from the anticipation of change and allowed us to focus instead on his dance.
'A Severe Insult to the Body' choreographed by Martin del Amo (1997).

Performance space:

How you handle the space in which you perform is part of the contract you make with your audience. A more relaxed space invites a more relaxed gaze, and clean surroundings demand sharper attention.

Your surroundings are in dialogue with, and affected by, the performances that take place within them. A hygienic space can, paradoxically, sometimes allow a more startlingly informal performance. A too hygienic stage can also, on occasion, crush the life out of what you do. It's a question of relative weight of impact.

How do you want to invite the audience to sit?

Or perhaps what you want to do is to command them?

Performance space:

If you perform in a found environment you raise references, meanings and questions in addition to those belonging to the material which you create. What dialogue can your material have with this space you have found? Can the material you make arise out of the environment itself? Or can the material you make complement or give friction to the context, energies and meanings inherent in the space? What dialogue does this space and material invite with an audience?

The space itself is not the performance.

Language:

When a piece arrives at a continuity that grips us such that we feel we would accept anything that might happen, it has the feeling of approximating to language – even where no language is present.

What do we mean when we use the word 'language' to describe movement?

Language:

Sign language is a language.

Language:

We want to know what happens next.

Choreography:

My current definition of choreography is this: 'Choreography is about making a choice, including the choice to make no choice.'

Or perhaps choreography is this: 'Arranging objects in the right order that makes the whole greater than the sum of the parts.'

Or this: 'The meaning or logic that arrives when you put things next to each other that accumulates into something which makes sense for the audience. This something that accumulates seems inevitable, almost unarguable. It feels like a story, even when there is no story.'

Breaking the rules

Breaking the rules:

I would like to add one more principle for how I'm writing this book. The principle is this: follow one subject down the page and allow a new subject to emerge, if it wants, at the end of each block.

I'd also like to add this principle: the rules are only useful if they're working, and I can break them when I want, so long as I know that I'm breaking them.

And this: when I get stuck I'll only work for a short time, maybe fifteen minutes, and then I'll drop that bit and work on something else. Banging my head against the wall to solve something could help, but then again, everything might just look a bit clearer in the morning.

If it's not working, drop it.

Breaking the rules:

Try breaking the rules on a need to break the rules basis.

Breaking the rules:

If the rule is to have no rules then maybe you could try breaking that?

(See also ‘Originality’.)

Research / How and what? / Dramaturgy / Theory / Curiosity

Research:

Research is whatever you need. It's as likely to be about remembering something you do know, as about finding out something you don't.

For instance, what made you interested in the first place?

What appears obvious to you (it may not be obvious to anybody else)?

What are you thinking about anyway?

What are you going to do anyway?

What are you reading, thinking, watching, doing, that you don't know why you're doing it?

It's all right not to know why you're doing something.

Research:

Research is useful so long as I know its research and don't start thinking it's the finished work. Sometimes it's better to put down the research and get on with the piece.

The research will do its work anyway, meanwhile the piece is the piece and has its own demands.

Your piece may not end up being about what you want it to be about. Hopefully though, it might end up being about something. The work is to notice what that something is. It might be more interesting than you think.

If you want to teach the audience something, there may be better ways to do it than by making a dance.

The fact that a dance or performance can affect an audience is not lessened by your, or their, inability to articulate quite how it happened. This is one of the attractions of the art form.

That you can't always articulate why it works, however, is no reason not to try and be clear.

How and what?:

Choose one minute of music, one minute of moving image, a short text and a still image.

Take no more than five minutes in your home to choose these things.

Accept what comes easily.

Browse through what you've chosen, and before you show or play something complete the following sentence: 'I chose this because . . .'

Analyse each thing. Try to observe the 'how' of how it was made and compare that to the 'what' of what you perceived from it.

How and what?:

Visit art galleries and try to observe the 'how' of how each thing was made and compare that to the 'what' of what you perceived from it.

Do the same when you watch dance pieces.

The trick is to develop a habit of allowing yourself to enjoy the 'what' while at the same time sparing a moment to consider the 'how'. A lifetime of this will pay off.

How and what?:

The painter Gerhard Richter wrote this in his notebook: 'What shall I paint? How shall I paint? "What" is the hardest thing because it is the essence. "How" is easy by comparison. To start off with the "How" is frivolous, but legitimate. Apply the 'How' and thus use the requirements of technique, the material and physical possibilities, in order to realize the intention. The intention: to invent nothing – no idea, no composition, no object, no form – and to receive everything: composition, object, form, idea, picture.'
Gerhard Richter, 'The Daily Practice Of Painting', Thames & Hudson Ltd, (1995) 2002, p. 129.

How and what?:

From the choreographer Xavier Le Roy: 'The "how" of the performer is what the audience gets and not the "what", but the "what" remains important.'
From a workshop at Exerce, Centre Chorégraphique National de Montpellier, 2007.

From the choreographer Meg Stuart: 'There's a moment when you can tell where the energy in the space, in the studio, in the theatre . . . it turns. They are not just doing movements, they are . . . it's a dance at this moment, it's like something just clicks and you realise you stepped this border and a dance is making itself. And you can't describe it but you feel like you're in a bit dangerous territory, you feel like, "Do you go there?" You think, "This is the greatest idea, this is no idea." It's like there's a lot of doubt at that moment also. And you feel like you're in a bit of a dangerous space and a delicate space, and then it's at that moment you know, I want to go there and dig!'
Meg Stuart interviewed by Jonathan Burrows, 'Conversations With Choreographers', South Bank Centre, 1998, p. 9.

Dramaturgy:

Dramaturgy describes the thread of meaning, philosophic intent or logic, which allows the audience to accept and unite the disparate clues you give them into a coherent whole, connecting to other reference points and contexts in the larger world.

A dramaturge is someone who collaborates with you to help find overviews of the work which disentangle threads of possible meaning, so that you can make consequent choices during the process.

Sometimes the role of dramaturge supports an artist to arrive somewhere, with strength, that they have never been before.

Sometimes a too sure dramaturgy approximates so strongly to the idea that a consequent piece is being made, that everyone gets fooled – except of course the audience, who are harder to fool.

Theory:

It's nice when people of a theoretical mind are interested in what we do. It blesses us with a different perspective which carries a seductive sense of validation, that the mess we create can be grasped by a logical mind.

The mess is also quite seductive.

Research:

As I read and research then I want to touch upon these mind expanding, horizon stretching, perception shifting thoughts and yet when I get in the studio I'm back to how simple things are in a dance.

I'm back to my own stupid self.

Curiosity:

Follow your curiosity.

Curiosity:

The audience are also curious.

Interview / Unfinished business / Questions / Principles

Interview:

Try interviewing your collaborators. You are the journalist and you know nothing. Ask them, 'What is this piece that you have made?' Invite them to say whatever comes into their mind to describe the ideal piece you're pretending to have made. Write it all down.

Find the principles buried in all this. Choose one principle.

There'll be a clue there somewhere.

It might be obvious.

Unfinished business:

What is the idea that refuses to go away even though you know it doesn't make sense, can't make sense?

How long has this idea been floating around in your mind?

What would happen if you followed this idea?

Complete and utter failure is always an option.

Even the best ideas sometimes fail. Even the worst ideas sometimes succeed.

You don't have to perform everything you make.

Questions:

Ask yourself ten questions a day for a week.

Write them down and don't answer them.

The one you need will do its job anyway, whether you look at them again or not.

Within the limitless possibilities of the question which you have asked, accept the answer that you get.

Principles:

Is there something, anything, that tells you how to begin?

Do one thing.

What's the next thing you want to do?

Try doing this for a week.

It's only a stupid dance.

Financial limitations / Studios / Funding applications

Financial limitations:

What does the context you are in, financially and in terms of infrastructure, allow you to do?

Your context will influence what happens, for good or bad; recognising your limitations is part of the process.

Practical limitations can be the most marvellous spur to creative decision-making.

I work in the kitchen.

Studios:

The choreographer Jerome Bel said this, 'There is a power on you in any place you go, so I knew that in a studio I will react by doing what I've done before, and don't want to do anymore . . . so I said, "Ok, no studio", and this changed the whole thing.'
From 'Parallel Voices' talk, Siobhan Davies Studios, London, February 2007.

Studios:

The place where you work will have an effect on what you can do.

Where do you work?

What might be the right place for you to work?

Funding applications:

If you apply for funding, you will have to write a very good description of what you're going to do. This is not the same thing as making a very good piece, though these two things get confused by some people.

Before you write this description you most likely don't know what you're going to do, only that you need to do it. Once you've written this description, however, you're in a different position. Now you still don't know what you're going to do, but you have a piece of paper saying that you do. The question is: how do you stop yourself from being tempted into believing what you wrote?

Sometimes just writing a description of a piece might be enough, you may not be able to improve upon it. Sometimes, however, your description might help you think about what you do want to make.

It's all just work.

Funding applications:

Perhaps the best way to write a funding application is as follows:

Don't assume they've ever heard of you, even if you're successful and you know everyone on the panel.

Begin by saying who you are and what you've done.

Next, say why they should give the money to you, and not someone else.

Finally, write a few sentences describing, best you can, what you want to do and how you're going to do it.

Then try to forget what you wrote. You wrote it for them and it won't help you at all.

The money might help you a lot though, if you get it. If you don't get it, then find another way to make a piece (see also 'Financial limitations').

You will find a way.

Preparation / Rehearsal schedule / Heaviness

Preparation:

Preparing to work is a tricky thing, it's easy to do too much and fix your expectations too strongly, and at the same time a certain amount of preparation can be very helpful in the stressful context of a dance studio (see also 'Studios').

Preparation:

'Even a little of this devotion delivers one from great fear.'
'The Bhagavad Gita', translated from the original Sanskrit by Alladi Mahadeva Sastry, Samata Books, Madras, (1977) 1995, p. 59.

This concept from yogic philosophy is endlessly useful to dancers, releasing us from that desire to do everything fully which, in the end, too often stops us from doing anything at all. Even a little is enough. This goes for exercise as well as it goes for making something.

Even a little is enough.

Are you enjoying it? It shouldn't be a chore.

The choreographer Neil Greenberg said this: 'For me the best kind of workshop is the kind that takes the least preparation.' It's a marvellous thought.
From an email to the author, 1999.

No preparation is also preparation, so long as it's the way you need to work right now. To arrive at the decision to make no preparation is also an action that can focus the mind.

Rehearsal schedule:

Sometimes one hour a day might be enough, three hours is certainly plenty – some people love to work all day.

How much time have you got? Maybe that's the right amount of time.

Making decisions and learning sequences can take as long as you've got.

Trust your boredom.

One thing a day might be enough.

A thing is whatever you want a thing to be.

Knowing when to stop working is as important as working.

Dancers are very disciplined people, but sometimes having the discipline to stop is the greatest discipline.

Rehearsal schedule:

The people that manage your work or the space you work in may expect you to work for long hours. Perhaps you could explain carefully to them the way that you need to work?

The pressure that comes from the other people you work with is sometimes a useful thing, but not always.

(See also 'Administrating the work'.)

Heaviness:

Heaviness arises often in the process of preparing, making and performing new work and can easily be misunderstood for profundity.

When this happens, and if it makes you unhappy, you might try gently questioning the rehearsal schedule, working methods, and material you have chosen.

Look at what you've made in the light of these questions and try one or two new approaches. Make one change at a time and take a break before making any decisions. You can always go back to what you did before.

Sometimes trying something and dropping it again will already have altered what you were doing.

Sometimes heavy pieces are profound.

Rehearsal schedule:

The first things you make are not the piece, but if you don't start somewhere then you won't go anywhere.

Begin with one idea. The next, if there is a next, can't be visible now.

Work one week without questioning what you're doing, and then have a look at it.

Think again, start again.

Concentrate on what you're doing, and let the bigger picture take care of itself.

It's only work.

Collaboration / Audience

Collaboration:

Collaboration is about choosing the right people to work with, and then trusting them. You don't, however, have to agree about everything. Collaboration is sometimes about finding the right way to disagree.

In the gap between what you each agree with, and what you disagree with, is a place where you might discover something new. It will most likely be something you recognise when you see it, but didn't know that you knew. This is the reason to collaborate.

When you allow yourself to make a discovery, then there's something for the audience to discover. When you try to agree too much with your collaborators then there's nothing new to discover, either for you or for the audience.

Audience:

The audience like to have a job to do.

Collaboration:

From the writer Adrian Heathfield: 'It's not as if, in a collaboration, you're moving towards what that other

person has said, you're moving towards what they haven't said.'
From 'The Frequently Asked', a durational lecture-performance organised by Tim Etchells and Adrian Heathfield, Tanzquartier Vienna, November 24th 2007.

From the writer Joe Kelleher: 'Collaborating is like two people banging their heads against each other, and the collaboration is the bruises that are left behind.'
Joe Kelleher, Ibid.

Collaboration:

Talking is only one way to collaborate.

Talking shouldn't become an easy escape from the frustrations which might, eventually, lead you somewhere.

Try also not talking too much.

Collaboration:

There are not many people in this world who you can collaborate with successfully, and when you find one you should treasure them. Sometimes, however, being alone for a while might be the best way to treasure them.

Collaboration:

With a bit of luck, your collaborator can lift you out of those occasional moments of despair when one wrong turn causes you to believe that everything is lost. You in turn

might offer them, from time to time, a little more perspective than they can manage alone.

(See also ‘Desperation’.)

Originality / Paradox

Originality:

This is a very hard one to write about. We all like to see something fresh, not least the presenters who put the work on, but the problem is you can't make a piece by trying to be original. If you make a piece by trying to be original, then the piece will only be about trying to be original.

Maybe what you do most easily is the most original thing you could do?

Or maybe the things you do most easily are habits you should question?

Originality:

What else is going on around you, and what has gone on before? What is the historical context into which you jump? Can you know this, and still work?

It's unlikely that you'll invent anything, especially if you desire too much to invent something.

It's only work.

It helps to keep your eyes open, but to know also when to close them.

In the end you do risk being stupid in order to work, and it can be hard to be stupid enough with history looking over your shoulder.

History is looking over your shoulder.

What you make won't be stupid.

Originality:

What is your own history? Is there something you haven't done that you want to do? Maybe thinking about it is enough?

Or maybe there's something you want to do, that you think you shouldn't do? What would happen if you walked back towards the thing you feel you shouldn't do?

Sometimes the thing we need is so close to us that we can't see it, so we undervalue what we know, in favour of what we don't know (see also 'Subject' and 'Self-expression').

What do you know, that you've forgotten that you know? Maybe it's very new to me?

Consider why you started to do this thing in the first place – why you wanted to dance or perform. Maybe there's a clue there, that's been buried under other people's classes and performances?

From a workshop in Munich: 'There can't be anything new without something old, the new can only arise through the tension between the two.'
Heidi Wilm, Tanzwerkstatt Europa workshop, Munich, 2006.

Originality:

The painter Philip Guston said this: 'Human consciousness moves, but it is not a leap: it is one inch. One inch is a small jump, but that jump is everything. You can go way out, and then you have to come back – to see if you can move that inch.'
Quoted in 'Guston', by Robert Storr, Abbeville Press Publishers, 1986, p. 99 – from Philip Guston, 'Faith, Hope and Impossibility', XXXI Artnews Annual 1966 (1965), p. 153.

He also said: 'I scrape out all that does not yet belong to me or that belongs too much . . .'
Ibid. p. 22. – from Irving Sandler, 'Guston: A Long Voyage Home', Artnews 58, 1959.

Paradox:

Sometimes to do something new, you have to reinvest, rather than reinvent.

Sometimes, however, to do something new, you have to question everything.

Originality:

Society has a tendency to define artists as people who subvert. This is understandable and occasionally useful.

'Contemporary performance has to establish its conventions and then stretch them, which is very hard. This is connected to the way in which creativity is seen as something which must involve a breach or transgression.'
Adrian Heathfield, Impusltanz workshop, Vienna, 2008.

The idea of a contract established with the audience at the start of a contemporary performance is an attempt to describe how we might find common ground in a field of broken convention.

It can feel at times in workshops as though the compulsion to subvert is so strong that things are challenged before they have had a chance to reveal what they have to offer. What if you tried waiting longer before breaking something? What does the thing itself reveal, and how might that challenge your preconceptions?

Sometimes it's useful to observe the obvious, and sometimes it's useful to subvert it. If you subvert the obvious, are you doing it out of habit, or by choice?

Subverting the obvious is one technique of contemporary art, but it's by no means the only way to work.

(See also 'Contract' and 'Breaking The Rules'.)

Originality:

The man I was talking to had enjoyed the performance, but he said wasn't it time I found some new movements? How could I let him know that I'd been drowning in new movements, that the only thing the piece would accept were movements so old they had given up trying. He was right, of course, but then again he didn't see the desperate things I'd had to throw away.

Maybe he would have loved what I'd thrown away?

(See also 'Desperation'.)

Originality:

The audience wants to see something they haven't seen before, but they want to recognise it when they see it.

'It is the function of the artist to evoke the experience of surprised recognition: to show the viewer what he knows but does not know that he knows.' This was said by the writer William Burroughs.
From a text on the work of the artist Gottfried Helnwein, published in the book 'Helnwein Faces', Edition Stemmle, 1992, p. 7.

Technique / Parrot on your shoulder / Authenticity / Daily practice / Dancing / Style / Fiddling

Technique:

You may, or may not, have one or more physical techniques that you have studied, or are studying. No matter, none of us is ever satisfied with our achievements in this direction: the nature of dance classes sets up in us a constant belief in our ability to improve. I personally felt a bit sad when I realised I was going to be old before I'd finally improved.

What if there was nothing to improve?

How do you want to move?

Parrot on your shoulder:

Most of us have a parrot on our shoulder which whispers in our ear every time we dance, saying, 'You can't do that, you don't do this well, you stole that idea from someone else, this is the thing you always do . . .' and the trick is to silence the parrot.

Sometimes you have to listen to the parrot.

At least it's your parrot.

I stole this idea from the choreographer Michael Whaites.

Authenticity:

Training emphasises the idea that there is a 'right' way to make a movement. It is only a short step from here to the compulsion we have, on occasion, to invest in movement a quality of truth – of 'realness'.

What would happen if we lied?

'Choreography is actions artificially staged': this was said by the choreographer Xavier Le Roy.
From a workshop at Exerce, Centre Chorégraphique National de Montpellier, 2007.

Sometimes there is a 'right' way to do a movement.

Technique:

The way you move affects the way you think about movement.

The aesthetic agendas held within our bodies from a lifetime of training create parameters that both enable and limit our ability to imagine what might also be possible.

How might we hold on to these physical blessings, whilst liberating ourselves from the boundaries they sometimes set to our imaginations?

Daily practice:

The daily practice needed to stay physically supple and coordinated takes time – time you may prefer to spend reading, thinking, planning and administrating your

choreography – but if you slowly let it slip then you risk losing how you move, and when you lose how you move it changes what you choreograph.

The way you move affects the way you think about movement.

What is your daily practice?

How do you want to move?

Technique:

Dancers work hard and are very disciplined about their work.

The technique you have is useful. It will, however, most likely do its job whether you focus on it or not.

Technique is whatever you need to do, to do what you need to do.

The audience enjoys skill, but anybody doing what they want to do, and doing it well, appears skilful.

(See also 'Virtuosity'.)

Technique:

Physical skills set up patterns in your brain that will pull your body in the direction of those patterns. Freedom to escape those patterns is only relative.

'As a totally integrated system, with many direct and indirect feedback circuits, information is constantly being gathered on the status of the body parts for the present and for the future. This is frequently compared with past movement activities to see if a stored posture and movement pattern is already available.'
J. Lesley Crow, 'The neural control of human movement', from 'Human Movement – An Introductory Text', edited by Marion Trew and Tony Everett, Churchill Livingstone, (1981) Third Edition 1997, p. 86.

When you first learn a new pattern your brain looks for similar existing patterns to copy. The material that looked fresh the first day has become oddly familiar the next, its freshness inhabited by the ghost of old movement. This is very clever, but sometimes frustrating.

Every act of dancing is a negotiation with the patterns your body is thinking.

Technique:

Movement is a hard thing to get hold of. No movement can be repeated exactly, and the sense of what we're doing is constantly altered by our shifting perceptions.

Maybe not being able to get hold is a useful quality?

Movement disappears because we're so good at making it more efficient. You see something and it looks extraordinary, and then you see it again a few days later and it's exactly the same, but suddenly seems quite ordinary. The body of the dancer has mastered it, and its original

extraordinariness – which came from the impossibility – has been replaced by an ordinariness of ease. Your piece of driftwood has been sandpapered.

Or maybe you want your wood smooth? It might work brilliantly.

Or what if you made things more impossible to begin with?

(See also 'Continuity'.)

Technique:

Merce Cunningham said this: 'How can you do a movement that you've done over and over again and think you have it perfect or whatever. How can you do it in a way that it becomes awkward again, so you have to, to find it all over again.'
Merce Cunningham in conversation with John Tusa, BBC Radio 3, December 7th 2003.

One of my most treasured possessions is a pirated copy of a rare film of the original cast of Balanchine's '*Agon*', filmed in 1957 by the National Film Board of Canada. The music on the film has slipped a bit and bright light has burned out patches of the stage, but in it there lives a glimpse of the original awkwardness of the dancers as they contort themselves into a whole new world (see also 'Filming').

Technique:

The patterns encoded in your body are not going to go away. If you break them down they'll be replaced quickly with another set of patterns – the set of patterns for breaking down the first set of patterns. You will then have to break this second set of patterns down, creating a third, and so on. This is a lifetime's work, but where will it lead you?

The question is: how can you make a friend of the way your body thinks? Perhaps then you can be free to choreograph.

(See also 'Habits'.)

Dancing:

The choreographer Jerome Bel said this: 'We didn't use any more dance, but we used a choreographic field.'
From 'Parallel Voices' talk, Siobhan Davies Studios, London, February 2007.

What is your relationship to the idea of dancing? What are the qualities that drew you towards dancing in the first place? What qualities of dancing are still useful to you now?

In what way might choreography be separate from the act of dancing?

(See the opening of the film '*Once Upon A Time In The West*', by Sergio Leone.)

Style:

One way to negotiate the techniques we adopt is by dreaming of finding our own style. We can't, however, make a style by trying to make a style. This doesn't mean that there is no such thing as style, but rather that style is what happens when the way you work clashes with the way you perform, and a third thing happens. It isn't always visible to us.

The best style is a happy accident of working. The question is: does it matter? Sometimes we look for style as a way of proving that what we're doing is original. It doesn't usually, however, prove anything of the sort.

You will find a style of working.

Noticing the style that emerges may or may not be a useful thing.

(See also 'Continuity'.)

Dancing:

Familiar moves performed in a diligent way are dull to watch. What is 'good' dancing and when is it useful? What would happen if you let go the things you think of as 'good' dancing?

You're going to dance as well as you can dance, however you try to dance.

Technique:

In dance we feel we want all the time to make the surface accurate.

If I look at a painting close-up the surface isn't accurate, but when I step back – there's the accuracy.

It takes a confident process to let go this desire for surface accuracy, and trust that the larger accuracy will appear.

Technique:

Rehearsal studios can be fraught, at times, with a tension that perplexes and defeats us.

'The subjective discomfort of attempting to maintain prolonged periods of unusual concentration, together with the inevitable poor performance at this stage, is highly stressful and requires considerable emotional commitment to sustain perseverance.'
Robert A. Charman, 'Motor Learning', from 'Human Movement – An Introductory Text', Churchill Livingstone, (1981) Third Edition 1997, p. 96.

Learning motor skills is emotionally stressful.

What strategies might the choreographer use to minimise the stress? Shorter working hours help, and adequate preparation to set achievable goals is also useful.

Sometimes stress is just what you need.

Technique:

The act of choreographing is intimately bound up with the act of remembering the movement we're working on. What we can, or cannot achieve, is limited by this dialogue between idea and physical reality.

'Once a movement is learnt, a sensory engram is established in the sensory cortex and used as a guide for the motor system of the brain to reproduce the same pattern of movement . . . Successive performance of a skilled activity results in an engram for the activity being laid down in the motor control areas as well as the sensory system.'
J. Lesley Crow, 'The neural control of human movement', from 'Human Movement – An Introductory Text', Churchill Livingstone, (1981) Third Edition 1997, p. 85.

The learning of new movement begins in the sensory part of the brain. It stands to reason then, that the sensorily most obvious movement is the easiest to remember: you won't forget to clap your hands. Then again, with enough repetitions you can probably remember almost anything. With enough repetitions the pattern is slowly encoded in the motor part of your brain, where it stays, more or less, forever.

Remembering movement is slow work. Every time we ask a dancer to try something new, we interrupt their process of learning and remembering. How might we maximise our ability to try new ideas, while minimising the interruption we cause to the process of remembering?

It will flow eventually.

If it isn't working, drop it.

Meanwhile, what might be memorable for the audience?

'It's the inorganic moments that you remember': Kevin Volans quoting the composer Morton Feldman.
From a conversation with the author, 1993.

Fiddling:

Fiddling with movement rarely adds anything; it is what it is. If you want something else, then try doing something different.

There's always something else.

Technique:

Technique is sometimes useful also in choreography.

Technique:

Technique is no more or less authentic than anything else.

Technique:

Technique is no more or less meaningful than anything else.

Virtuosity

Virtuosity:

Virtuosity is just another way to help the audience to care what happens next.

Virtuosity raises the stakes to a place where the audience knows something may go wrong. They enjoy watching this negotiation with disaster. Will the performer fall, or forget what they're doing, or will they get through it?

The resulting anticipation, poised on the brink of success or failure, suspends time in a moment of in-breath. This slowed-down time, in the midst of risk, is as much of a pleasure for the performer as for the audience.

However, if everything is virtuosic then there's nothing against which to read the virtuosity: it has to be in balance with other modes of engagement.

(See also 'Ballet'.)

Virtuosity:

From a workshop in Rio: 'I'm interested in the idea of treating simpler things with the intensity that you would treat things that are virtuosic.'
Frederico Paredes, Panorama Festival workshop, Rio de Janeiro, 2005.

From Sydney: 'My feeling is, the person being virtuosic can be experiencing something beyond display; from the outside it's virtuosic, but from their perspective it's how they're seeing the world.'
Lee Wilson, Space For Ideas workshop, Sydney, 2005.

Virtuosity:

Simple things sometimes accumulate in virtuosic ways.

Virtuosity:

Virtuosity is not going to go away, we like it too much.

It comes in many shapes.

There are other ways of perceiving the world.

The audience enjoys skill, but anybody doing what they want to do, and doing it well, appears skilful.

What interests you?

(See also 'Technique'.)

Hoarding / Beginnings

Hoarding:

If you use what you find straight away there will always be something else you can use later.

This is true even of material you've found that you think might make a good ending. You may be right and it would make a good ending, but then again, let's be honest, how do you know what will be going on by the time you get to the end?

There's also the chance that if you hold tight onto the thing you've found so far you might stop yourself finding something even better.

'By the observance of *aparigraha* (non-hoarding), the yogi makes his life as simple as possible and trains his mind not to feel the loss or the lack of anything. Then everything he really needs will come to him by itself at the proper time.'
B.K.S. Iyengar, 'Light On Yoga', The Aquarian Press, an imprint of HarperCollins Publishers, (1966) 1991, p. 35.

(See also 'Endings'.)

Hoarding:

Good enough will do for now.

Beginnings:

When you begin your performance we will be there in the audience wanting it to work, and we'll accept anything, more or less, for a while. You have our attention.

The thing is, after a while, will we care what happens next? What did you think when you watched your own piece? What did you think when you watched it again four weeks later?

One thing about the beginning is that this is your chance to give us some clues how to watch what you've made (see also 'Contract'). Perhaps the most clues are in the moment when you walk onto the stage. What can you tell us in that moment? What principles or thoughts about performance might inhabit that moment? Can you reassure me that I'm sitting in the right way to watch your performance?

My colleague Matteo and I usually rehearse only the beginning and the end, but particularly the beginning. Our two ideas are:

Walk on as though we were walking into Matteo's kitchen.

Walk on in a formal way that is unexpectedly informal.

When we get it right the audience often applaud. Our intention is to communicate rather than manipulate.

It's all right to manipulate the audience if that's what you want to do.

Beginnings:

The choreographer Jerome Bel said this: 'The first seven minutes of a performance are for free, the audience can accept anything – after this is another problem, then they want what they have paid for – but during those first seven minutes, as choreographer, you have total freedom. You can try to attempt something else, to put the audience on a different track than the usual one for the rest of the performance. It's after those seven minutes that they start to yell at you'.
From an email to the author, 2009.

Hoarding:

The obvious thing may have been to save my bit about endings until the end, instead of which I'm going to put it on the next page.

I don't know how this book will end.

Endings

Endings:

The right ending is the ending you almost don't notice, but which seems absolutely recognisable and unquestionable when you reach it.

It's sometimes worth trying a few endings.

The ending is important, but only as part of everything that came before.

You could do anything, but it has to be the right anything.

A good ending elicits a particular noise from an audience. You make it yourself when you're in the audience, but you probably don't notice yourself making it. It is an accumulation of tiny exhalations from many people, which contain notes of both celebration and relief, as well as a certain sadness.

The relief is that the piece got to the end without losing the plot.

Endings:

Before the premiere of '*Both Sitting Duet*' we worked with a rehearsal director who made us remake the ending every

day for a week. Every day the note came back that the ending was still not right. On the final day no note came. We said, 'But what about the ending?' 'Oh,' she replied, 'That was ok.'

Jonathan Burrows, Matteo Fargion and Claire Godsmark, Kaaitheater Studios, Brussels, 2002.

Keeping it going / Pacing

Keeping it going:

You've found some movement, or words, or other material that shows something of the quality you're looking for. How long can you keep it going for and still hold the attention of the audience?

This is another possible definition of choreography: 'A way to keep things going' (see also 'Rate of change').

The paradox is that you have to make the right next move, but when you do it's not that important; sometimes it only becomes visible when it's wrong. Sometimes the right next move slots into place like a jigsaw piece, and then disappears.

Keeping it going:

The most ideal choreography needs no choreography. In this ideal choreography one thing follows another and all the choices arise from concentration alone (see also 'Principles').

Choreography is what you do when you get stuck.

When people first make a piece they've been practising and learning and collecting things and waiting for this moment

for twenty years or more, and it just flows out – twenty years of slowly accumulated work. And it's a success, and the next year they're given a studio for two months and they try to do in two months what it took them twenty years to do before, and they get stuck. This is usually when people start to think about choreography.

But then again, the first piece they made, the one that had taken twenty years to accumulate, had its hands already in the bucket of tricks. It was filled with the echoes of all the books, music, films, performances and so forth that they'd loved, and which were full of technique. The choreographer was just in the lucky position of being able to look away. The question is: when it comes to it (and it might not), how much conscious technique do you need, and how might you use it?

Keeping it going:

Many people describe the making of a piece of choreography as 'developing the material'. What do we mean when we use the expression 'developing the material'?

When might it be useful to develop the material? Or what would happen if you just worked and didn't develop anything?

Keeping it going:

Five-minute choreographies need almost no choreography.

Twenty-minute pieces arrive at their own peculiar shape and logic. Twenty minutes used to be the most common

length for dance pieces. Dance pieces are hard to watch and twenty minutes is sometimes enough.

One-hour dance pieces are something different again. We all try to make one-hour dance pieces and most of us fail most of the time.

One-hour pieces need the most choreography.

There is a strong demand from the marketplace for one-hour pieces, which are seen as the minimum duration to justify a full evening's work. Many of us go overnight from making short dances to wrestling with monsters.

How do you want to work? How might you frame the way you want to work within the demands of the marketplace?

(See also 'The marketplace'.)

Pacing:

The pace at which you begin your piece will have an effect on your ability to keep it going.

If you start too fast it can be hard, though not impossible, to keep going.

If you start slow, you will need strong material to hold our attention.

The pace with which you begin is an important part of the contract you make with the audience in those opening moments. The sense of the unfolding piece will be read by

the audience in relation to the energy arising from that initial impetus.

(See also 'Keeping it going' and 'Contract'.)

Keeping it going:

Every time I start work on a new piece there floats the fantasy, 'This will be the one, this will be the two hour piece'. Every time, however, the piece reaches forty-five minutes, almost to the minute, and then quietly surrenders.

Dub reggae / Rate of change / Simple material / Desperation

Dub reggae:

Lee Scratch Perry produced a dub reggae track in which, somewhere in the middle, he uses just one flute note. There's no other flute in the track and he never repeats that note. I've heard the track hundreds of times, and the following things happen to me every time I hear it: first, the note happens, and I remember that I'd forgotten that this was the track with the one flute note; secondly, I laugh. It's a laugh of expectation subverted. Each time after I've laughed I laugh again, thinking that he must have anticipated my laughter.

The track is called '*Bucky Skank*'.
Lee Scratch Perry, The Upsetters, New Town Sound Ltd, Trojan Records, 1973.

Rate of change:

This idea came from the composer Kevin Volans:

'Not only must things change, but the rate at which they change must also change.'
From a conversation with the author, 1993.

There are, of course, many exceptions to this dictum. Then again think of that one flute note (see 'Dub reggae').

Movement is easy to make and hard to remember and master. Faced with a looming deadline we have a tendency to fill up the time of our pieces by repeating the few movements we've found.

What would happen, for instance, if you performed your best movement, or material, only once? (see also 'Simple material').

Rate of change:

No change:
– 1 1 1 1 / 1 1 1 1 / 1 1 1 1 / 1 1 1 1

Change:
– 1 1 1 1 / 2 2 2 2 / 3 3 3 3 / 4 4 4 4

Rate of change changes:
– 1 1 1 1 1 1 1 / 2 2 2 / 3 / 4 4 4 4 4

No change is also great.

Rate of change:

Rate of change is one way to keep things going (see also 'Keeping things going').

Observe the tricks of editing which television uses to keep us from changing channels. They're so familiar we don't even notice them.

Rate of change:

Ideas like rate of change can be hard to work with consciously. Try using it instead as a tool to analyse things you've made which are not holding your attention or have become boring to watch. Observe the rate of change. Maybe you've used some material too much? Or maybe you've let something go too soon which you could have kept going for longer?

Sometimes small adjustments change everything.

It's worth a try.

Rate of change:

Watch Steve Martin performing *'The Great Flydini'*.
'The Tonight Show Starring Johnny Carson', *NBC.*

Simple material:

You might find that if you use your best material wisely and sparsely, you can keep the thing going for a while with something much, much simpler.

Rate of change:

Are you repeating things out of desperation? Is there a better way you could use repetition? (see also 'Repetition').

Desperation:

It's all right to be desperate.

Stillness and silence / Fear of being boring

Stillness and silence:

Stillness and silence are as strong as any other material, and without them your audience will become exhausted.

Try cutting some holes.

Try doubling the length of the holes.

Maybe you want your audience to be in a state of exhaustion?

Our tolerance for stillness is greater than you might imagine.

Stillness and silence:

Some performers prefer to 'feel' the time of a pause, and some prefer to count. Both ways are valid and each arrives at a different focus and effect.

Your feeling for time during a performance is affected by the adrenaline pumping through your body. This may be exactly what you want to capitalise on, so that the pause is sewn into the fabric of the time you and the audience are experiencing.

Or you might prefer the time imposed by a counted pause, which enforces its presence by stepping outside the time of the experience, bringing a fresh and counterpointed stop to the flow of the piece.

Stillness and silence:

Kevin Volans, on the music he and Matteo Fargion wrote for '*The Stop Quartet*': '. . . we got back to silence as a structural element and not just as a pause.'
From a conversation with the author, 1997.

When is a pause just a pause, and when does it become another material?

Pause as material can be very powerful.

Fear of being boring:

The fear of being boring holds us often in the grip of a terrible compulsion to keep moving.

What is the worst that could happen if you stopped still?

Fear of being boring:

Being bored is not necessarily a bad experience, especially if there's a payoff coming.

Minimal and maximal

Minimal and maximal:

The idea to use minimal means to create the maximum effect is widespread in many cultures.

The idea to use maximal means to create the maximum effect is equally widespread.

There are many points between these polarities. Large work is not necessarily maximal and smaller work is not necessarily minimal. Spectacle can come in all sizes.

Which way do you want to work?

(See also 'The marketplace'.)

Minimal and maximal:

The painter Barnett Newman said this: 'If you want everything in a work of art, what you're left with is everything.'
Quoted by Morton Feldman in the 'Darmstadt Lecture', 'Morton Feldman Essays', edited by Walter Zimmerman, Beginner Press, 1985, p. 186.

It's just a choice.

If you try to be in a place that's open to everything then it can be hard to orientate yourself towards something.

Or maybe what you need is everything?

Does it work? / Showings / Mentoring

Does it work?:

Like it or not, there comes a point, or rather several points, when you have to decide whether what you're making is working or not.

This, of course, is a subjective thing.

Then again, your audience is also subjective.

If you judge the piece too soon you might kill it, but if you judge it too late, it might be too late to change.

When would be the right time to try and get an overview of what you've done? And how would you know if it's working or not?

Does it work?:

What do you really think about what you've done?

Watch your piece on screen with a friend. You'll most likely know, before your friend speaks, what you really think.

Sometimes it's best to wait a week before you watch what you've filmed, until you've forgotten what you thought you were doing.

If you have negative questions about what you've done, what could you do to address them?

Does it work?:

Sometimes small shifts of order can change a lot. Sometimes a different way of thinking about performance can alter everything.

Make one change at a time and record all the changes in some way, so you don't become confused about what you've tried and what you haven't.

Take a break.

Showings:

Showings, with feedback, are quite popular.

Is your piece ready for the feedback?

Or if you have already showed it, how many liked it and how many had too many questions? Might that reflect what a bigger audience would think? What questions do you have about what you've done?

What do you do if the response is negative?

It's just a stupid dance.

Showings:

For two years I tried to make a solo. I fantasised about summing up everything my body had learnt in one glorious outpouring. Amongst the attempts were two versions of the same dance, each 45 minutes long, one improvised and the other rigorously choreographed. I showed them to several people, and the more opinions I heard the less I knew. Finally my friend Chrysa took me aside and said, 'You know, the first time I saw the solo it was like your guts spilled out across the floor, and now you've choreographed it and it's like you've knitted yourself an immaculate doily'.
Chrysa Parkinson, from a conversation with the author, 2002.

'The Oxford English Dictionary' defines doily as: 'a small ornamental mat made of lace or paper.'
The Oxford Compact English Dictionary, Oxford University Press, 2000.

You have to have something to fantasise about.

Mentoring:

To be honest, none of us is quite sure what mentoring is.

Are you required to have a mentor?

What do you need from them?

How might you help them to help you?

Mentoring:

Sometimes the best mentor is the person who is already doing that work for you, though you may not know it: the one whose opinions are present even when they are not.

Mentoring:

Your mentor can't solve your problems for you, but with any luck they might help you to solve them for yourself.

Other bodies / States

Other bodies:

There are other ways of experiencing or thinking about the body than steps or movement.

Many dance and performance practitioners build their relationship with the performing body upon other, perhaps less easily definable, approaches and strategies.

These include working with experiential or imagined states of being – physical, emotional or mental.

Also socially and politically motivated work, for instance that dealing with gender, minority rights or specific cultural issues.

Or more philosophically and conceptually driven pieces, where the body may become a site for representation and reference, rather than physical invention.

Each of these bodies demands its own approach to time, space and continuity, and each of them can arrive at something that we recognise as a choreography.

Other bodies:

When you work from other physicalities, like those above, can the material be ordered the way that other movement materials – for instance steps – might be ordered? Or could the process for ordering the material come from an equivalent emotional, sensory, philosophical, conceptual or intellectual source as the material itself, or from the process by which you found the material? Or is there another way?

Which way are you working? Which way do you want to work? Which way does your material allow you to work?

States:

Is the state you're searching an image or an actuality? An image, for instance, might be 'My body is transparent': an actuality might be 'I ask a question'. Or are you searching a different kind of state?

Do these two impulses, image or actual, effect the same change on the doer? On the watcher?

Is it about finding strong movement, or is it about the intention behind the movement?

Or is it not about physicality at all, is the body only a part of it?

What do you want from the body? What can it give you?

Other bodies:

'Within this story, who is this body who dances there?'
Marcela Levi, Panorama Festival workshop,
Rio de Janeiro, 2005.

This thought returned again and again during a workshop in Rio, and became a filter through which we considered everything we saw.

Other bodies:

Steve Paxton came to watch *'The Stop Quartet'* and afterwards he told us, 'Great work, why isn't it more erotic?'
From a conversation with the author, 1997.

Distracting the self / Paradox / Choreography / Performance / Electric guitars

Distracting the self:

'We added details to what we did, to distract our minds and get to a situation of "no mind", to be so busy that we couldn't perform.'
Jane McKernan, Elizabeth Ryan and Emma Saunders, Space For Ideas workshop, Critical Path, Sydney, 2005.

The above thought came up in a workshop in Sydney. We all agreed that we had experienced similar uses of distracting devices, in order to be freed from the burden of what we'd set ourselves to do. We'd all chosen, at one time or another, to work with a focus that overwhelmed us into letting go.

Paradox:

Sometimes in dance you have to work counter-intuitively, you have to go right in order to arrive left.

Sometimes in performance you have to find a way to distract yourself, in order that yourself can be revealed.

Distracting the self:

The writer Peter Handke said this: 'In my work concentration – forceful concentration – is often wrong. In order to

achieve something I have to allow my mind to wander, and at the same time must be attentive in my distractedness. This is a sort of game with your own consciousness: you seemingly give it a free reign, and then suddenly catch it when it thinks it's free.'
Peter Handke, from 'Die Geschichte des Bleistifts' ('The Story Of A Pencil'), translated by Philip Thorne, Suhrkamp, 1985, p. 171.

Distracting the self:

How do I release my grip on the desire to do, enough that I can do?

Distracting the self:

Being lost in music is the traditional approach.

Being lost in the collaborative moment is another. 'You have to be right there, and at the same time you have to give it up completely': the percussionist Robyn Schulkowsky describes the self, distracted in the moment of sharing time. *From a conversation with the author, 1999.*

Reading a score is its own distraction (see also 'Scores').

Counting, of course, works like a mantra to distract the mind and let the self be free.

States of being are, in themselves, both material and distraction from material (see also 'States').

Distracting the self:

All material should to some extent look after the performer enough that the performer doesn't feel responsible for everything, leaving them more free to perform intuitively. Material should release the performer from being overburdened by having to hold the whole show together by force of personality alone, which can be an exhaustive process. There are many ways to support the performer, including strong principles for the work, strong principles for how the work is performed, strong technical approach to the work, clear relationship to audience, clear relationship to the other performers and strong text or score. All of these approaches allow the performer at some level to think, 'I'm doing what I'm supposed to do, and I can't do any more than that'. This is an illustration of the paradox that ideas imposed on top of spontaneous performance can sometimes help the spontaneity.

Distracting the self:

The choreographer Susanne Linke related the following story: Jerome Bel wanted to reference her Schubert solo *'Wandlung'* (1978), as part of his piece *'The Last Performance'* (1998). She had sent a videotape of the solo to Paris for the performers to learn, but it wasn't working, they had followed the moves but it didn't look right. Susanne went to Paris and watched. 'It was so funny', she said, 'they weren't counting.'
Susanne Linke, from a conversation with the author, 2002.

The extraordinary, seemingly spontaneous and felt power of the thing she was doing in response to the music, was

held aloft by a foundation of measured time. How could they have known? (see also 'Distracting the self').

I imagine I have also seen people simply hold the emotion aloft, but then again how would I know how they did it, and in what way would it matter if I knew or not?

Choreography:

This suggests another possible definition of choreography: 'Choreography is a way to set up a performance that takes care of some of the responsibility for what happens, enough that the performer is free to perform.'

The question then is: how much choreography do you need?

Paradox:

'I'm not performing' may be the best strategy to use in order to perform.

Or perhaps 'I'm performing' may be the best strategy to use in order not to perform.

Both strategies involve being differently aware of what you're doing, and of your relation to the audience. Both strategies are useful only so long as they have not yet become habitual.

Question everything.

Paradox:

Most of us prefer to dance than to watch somebody else dance.

This is a useful but sobering thing to remember.

Performance:

'I like to move' isn't necessarily a good reason to ask other people to watch you move.

Electric guitars:

Most electric guitarists hear rock music first and then buy a guitar.

Most dancers go to a class first and then see a dance performance.

Many of our problems stem from this paradox.

It's a glorious paradox.

Predictable and unpredictable / Expectation

Predictable and unpredictable:

Kevin Volans again: 'What is predictable, must be both predictable and unpredictable; and what is unpredictable, must be both unpredictable and predictable.'
From a conversation with the author, 1993.

If you look at that for long enough it will make sense.

I will, however, at risk of losing something of its conciseness, try and say it more simply:

If you set up the expectation that what you are doing is unpredictable, and then you go on being unpredictable, the outcome inevitably is that I get bored because I know you're going to go on being unpredictable: in other words, you've achieved the opposite of what you set out to do, and you have, in fact, become predictable.

You could, for instance, break my expectation for a moment, and do something predictable in the middle of your unpredictability.

If, on the other hand, you set up something which is meant to be predictable, where you anticipate that the audience will expect something to continue, you can make it much more

interesting if you subvert that expectation with something unexpected.

It's how horror films are made.

The audience wants to care what happens next.

Predictable and unpredictable:

Observe how the more chaotic a firework display is the more you love it, and yet you find yourself looking for patterns anyway.

Expectation:

In the absence of narrative, assuming for the moment that we have none, then other factors come into play that determine whether or not the audience still cares what happens next.

The audience wants a job to do: they want to be allowed to fill in some gaps in their understanding of what's happening. Somewhere between underlining everything or being unclear to the point of obscurity, is a level of conversation between you and your audience where both collude to make sense of the performance. It's in this place that the delights of expectation indulged or subverted can raise the roof.

(See also 'Dub reggae'.)

Narrative / Ballet / Continuity

Narrative:

When I make a dance, no matter how concrete or abstract, I experience at times the unexpected sense that a narrative quality is unfolding. This feeling often arises not while I'm creating the piece, but at some remote point in a moment of performance, when the combination of movement logic and human presence has approximated to a meaning that wasn't there when I began.

On the first day working on *'The Quiet Dance'* I said to Matteo: 'Look, this time why should we wait until we've finished the piece before we acknowledge this sense of narrative continuity, why can't we try and work with it?' He said, 'Because it's a stupid idea and there is no story and you're fooling yourself if you think there is.'
From a conversation with the author, 1996.

Matteo is a composer.

(See also 'Continuity'.)

Narrative:

Human beings like stories. If you want to tell a complex story, however, you may ultimately have to speak.

The stories we tell ourselves when we watch dance are fairly basic.

This is not necessarily a bad quality.

Ballet:

Everybody thinks they understand the stories in ballet, but this understanding is underpinned by cultural codes that short cut the act of storytelling.

Ballet:

Ballet remains resolutely popular, and it bears a bit of wondering why this might be.

The cultural codes help – the mirror-image of wealth and status held up to a wealthy audience – but it's worth also looking beyond that to the physicality of the form itself, and wondering why it holds our attention. This is my guess:

Ballet is a dance poised always on the brink of falling, and yet it never falls.

(See also 'Expectation' and 'Failure'.)

Ballet:

Ballet also arrives at an extraordinary sense of continuity, built as it is from a series of basic positions and steps which suggest, on the one hand, infinite possibilities, and on the other hand give the watcher a hint always of where they might go next. The watcher is caught in a constant play of expectation and resolution, which draws the mind on. The rules are simple enough to grasp but complex enough to keep us guessing. The continuity that arises approximates to a language, which we imagine we recognise even though we can't articulate what it is that we understand by it.

Continuity:

How one thing connects to the next thing, is perhaps as important as the thing itself. Within this passage of relation lies the logic, narrative, pattern or subject that we, as human beings, are bound to look for (see also 'Relation').

Continuity:

One of the common logics of movement is to connect sequences by a process of cause and effect. Each movement triggers the next reactive movement in a sensible chain of action.

Cause and effect can be a useful tool. It produces streams of movement which point forwards in the imagination of the watcher, and at the same time creates a patterning in the body which helps us remember a sequence or keep an improvisation going.

Cause and effect can also become habitual to do and predictable to watch.

When might cause and effect be a useful tool and how could you use this tool in a more productive way?

Ballet:

William Forsythe placed his ballet dancers inside the Laban cube and asked them to improvise stretching points of the body out to the twenty-seven points of the cube, at the same time fundamentally allowing the same technical actions of ballet to operate. The resulting flow of movement still looked like ballet, but the linear phrases of ballet were replaced by a new continuity which rearranged all of the furniture whilst leaving the room recognisable.

The shift was in the continuity, which then produced a shift of style.

The shift of style itself has now, of course, begun its own avalanche of change.

Continuity:

Contact improvisation is built from the principle that two people make contact lightly and roll the point of connection across any body part, the way you would roll a ball between your hands. What follows is a miracle of shared movement style, free always to move beyond, but anchored in a universal physical sense that anybody can access.

It began with an idea.

Continuity / Sectional pieces / Material / Make six things / Choreography / Flow / Relation

Continuity:

Can an individual movement be defined as 'material', or is 'material' what happens when you begin to put things together?

In music, a single note played once does not necessarily constitute a material.

I only mention this because many problems can arise in dance making from the assumption that the material has been found, and that all that needs to be done is to put it together.

'Putting it together' is choreography, and the rest is just dancing.

Just dancing is enough. It depends what you want.

Continuity:

The meaning that arises from the relationship between things can alter their individual meanings.

Your greatest material will only be great in the right place.

Sectional pieces:

One product of cut and paste technique is that pieces often become very sectional – made up of passages of one kind of material followed by passages of another – with obvious jumps between ideas.

This can be a very successful way to work, but it isn't the only way to work.

Which way does your piece need to work? Could it work another way?

The process you follow will determine to a large extent the continuity produced, which will in turn affect the way the audience reads the piece.

(See also 'Cut and paste'.)

Material:

What does the material want to do?

Listening to what the material is telling you to do requires as much concentration, control and sensitivity as any other way of working. What happens as a result of this may not immediately look like what you expected, but given time it will usually begin to feel like yours.

It is yours.

Sometimes the material knows more than you.

Accept what comes easily.

Continuity:

Looking for interesting movement can be a thankless task.

Looking for a style can be a thankless task.

Sometimes the most remarkable style emerges not from an idiosyncratic way of moving, but from how you put quite ordinary movements together. Ordinary movements, when accumulated in unusual ways, can cause the body to let go its usual patterns. Much of what is interesting then comes from the involuntary actions thrown up by the dancer's attempt to negotiate a seemingly impossible clash of tasks.

William Forsythe uses the expression 'residual movement' to describe these incidental movements that arise from clashes of continuity, when the body ties itself into a knot and then struggles to be released.

Some dancers enjoy this kind of thing and some don't.

(See also 'Style'.)

Continuity:

I asked Henry to walk slowly placing his feet in a series of numbered boxes like a ballroom dancing manual. When he'd mastered that, we doubled the speed of his stepping and what had previously been stiff began to flow. The footsteps disappeared, and revealed above was an overlapping and twisting dance of incidental movement thrown up by the effort. This looked like style but was fallen

upon in an accident of working. It became the bedrock of a piece called *'The Stop Quartet'*. It became also, in time, a style we could switch on and off at will.
Henry Montes in 'The Stop Quartet' (1996).

Make six things:

Try making six movements and putting them in the right order.

This was the instruction Merce Cunningham gave in a workshop. He is, of course, describing the ideal choreography: the right things in the right order.
Merce Cunningham workshop, Edinburgh International Festival, 1979.

Choreography:

Here is another definition of choreography, this time from the choreographer Liz Aggiss: 'Choreography is the right person, doing the right material, in the right context.'
From a workshop at Bodysurf, Findhorn, Scotland, 2006.

She also said, 'Choreography is taking an idea and worrying it to death.'

Make six things:

Find six small objects and make an installation, placing them in the right order. Add one idea that breaks our expectation of what's happening.

It's not about how clever you are, it's about the indefinable sense of pleasure you get from doing it.

What is that?

Make six things:

'When does a pattern become a pattern?' This was a question asked by the composer Morton Feldman.
From 'Crippled Symmetry', 'Morton Feldman Essays', edited by Walter Zimmerman, Beginner Press, 1985, p. 128.

Make six things:

Write a score for six imagined sounds. Find a symbol for each sound. Write or draw the score with the sounds shifting between the following possible relationships: separate, overlapping or unison.

Don't practise the sounds or the composition until you've written the score. Write it first and find out what it sounds like afterwards.

Make it the length of an Elvis Presley song.

Try performing it.

(See also 'Relation' and 'Scores'.)

Flow:

Flow is an accident of the attempt to get from one event to the next event. It is one possible thing that can happen when the right things are put in the right order.

However, if you let everything flow then we'll have nothing against which to read the flow.

(See also 'Predictable and unpredictable'.)

Continuity:

Flow is not just about smooth movement.

Relation:

Continuity is the relation of one thing to the next thing in time.

There are many other kinds of fruitful relation to be had.

Relation / Solos, duos, trios, quartets / Ideas

Relation:

One of the greatest strengths of dance is this: if you put two people doing two different dances next to each other, we will almost always find a relationship between the two things we're seeing – we will even enjoy it.

But if almost every relationship between events works, why should I care about the relationships I'm watching?

Some relationships do make us care.

Relation:

'Yes, everything always goes, but you only get away with that for a short time': from a workshop in London.
Tom Roden, Hothouse workshop, The Place Theatre, 2004.

Relation:

When you work with two people, you might think of the 'material' as being what happens between them.

Just putting two things side by side works. It depends what you want.

Or might there be a more interesting connection you could find?

Solos, duos, trios, quartets:

The number of people you work with is a strong influence on the choreographic choices you can make. This number game is abstract, but at the same time it's everything. The people you work with are your most important material.

What could be the possible impact and relationship of having fewer people, and what is the impact and relationship of more?

When does a group become a crowd, and what does that imply?

How might smaller or larger forces relate differently to the audience?

In what way could working with only one or two people shape and determine your subject, or what might more people allow to be communicated?

I asked the choreographer Deborah Hay to tell me how to make a solo. 'It's a bag of tricks', she replied. 'Oh, and you've got to think really big.'
From a conversation with the author, 2008.

More people doesn't necessarily mean more will happen.

What can your context sustain?

You can't do everything.

(See also 'The marketplace'.)

Ideas:

There are not that many ideas. It might take a while to find one, but it's worth the wait.

Sometimes you only realise it's an idea after you've found it.

It's all just work.

Relation:

Matteo wrote five 100-note melodies and I made five 100-note dance phrases and we put them together.

We invented delicate ways that the two things could connect, played games with the rhythm and held the whole performance together with a thread of looks and breaths. We watched it on video and thought it looked great. Unfortunately, however, the audience we showed it to couldn't see any connection at all.

Six months later during a search for old things to steal for a new piece we found the video of the 100 melodies duet and watched it. There was nothing there; we could see no visible connection at all anymore; we had fantasised the whole thing. We had known so well what we were trying to do that we had fooled ourselves into seeing it.

The 100 notes and some arm waving eventually made their way into another performance, so our efforts weren't entirely wasted.

Nothing is ever wasted.

Relation / Time / Rhythm

Relation:

If you do place two dancers next to each other, then what relation in time do you want them to have?

Sometimes it's useful to observe the obvious and sometimes it's useful to subvert it (see also 'Subject').

Do these two dancers share the same time, or do they hold to their own time? What are the benefits of sharing time, and what are the benefits of ignoring each other's time?

What is the time of the audience?

No relation at all is just another kind of relation. This is also a choice.

Time:

Contemporary dance has always been interested in the idea of weight falling in response to gravity. This weight falling in response to gravity produces a very particular flow of action, with a very particular pace. Is this pace holding your attention? How could you help it to hold your attention? What other way could you think of pacing the unfolding action?

Contemporary dance's interest in gravity is, in part, a reaction against the anti-gravity world of ballet. Is this important to you or not? How do you want to move? (see also 'Ballet').

Time:

The logic of ballet, glued together in tricky ways from a limited set of possibilities, sets up a particular kind of disjointed time. It comes, perhaps, from the clash between the stuck together impossibility of the movement, and the way that this is then shoehorned into the music. The disjointed time of ballet is quite intriguing for an audience.

Tutus and men in tights are also intriguing for an audience, but for different reasons (see also 'Ballet').

Time:

Squeezing a movement into the wrong time frame can be quite gripping. The dancer is engaged in the attempt to negotiate the conundrum, and because they are engaged, then the audience are also engaged.

It's just a way to wake things up.

Time:

The relationship of dance movements to time is notoriously slippy. The body has a tendency to make things more efficient. Things get shorter. Adrenalin and our own changing sensory perceptions affect our ability to steady ourselves in the temporal world. What strategies might we use to hold

fast in this storm? Or perhaps flying loose is exactly what you need? (see also 'Technique').

Time:

The time of a body dancing freely is a multiple time, cut loose from pulse, able to shift constantly between different speeds and pacing. This is one choice. It is worth reflecting, though, that a dance which goes all speeds can't change speed. The dance which goes all speeds is all unpredictable, which then becomes predictable and we lose interest. This can happen despite quite wonderful movement.

Audiences like change.

(See also 'Predictable and unpredictable'.)

Time:

The desire of contemporary dance to assert itself as an art form in its own right, separate from music, has led it to let go of pulse as an organising principle of time. This is a strange perversion and a joyous one. Most of the world dances to a beat.

'The tendency to dance without the beat comes also from the demand to make larger pieces, which by definition need to embrace more kinds of material than a traditional short dance form, and which often use more theatrical forms which have no pulse.' This was said during a workshop in Munich (see also 'Keeping it going'.)
Christine Chu, Tanzwerkstatt Europa workshop, Munich, 2006.

Time:

The speed you go is a strong influence on the movement you can make. This is particularly true of dancing to a pulse, where the body organises and coordinates itself around the rise and resolution of each beat.

The way you dance to reggae is different from the way you might dance to death metal.

Rhythm:

From a workshop in London: 'If you don't start with rhythm it's very hard to include it.'
Gildas Diquero, Hothouse workshop, The Place Theatre, London, 2004.

What happens if the material comes out of the rhythm?

What happens if the rhythm comes out of the material?

The rhythms we create often seem obvious to us, but they may not be obvious to anybody else. Simple rhythms simply accumulated can be surprisingly intriguing (see also 'Self-expression').

Rhythm:

'When you use rhythm it's very hard to get to the floor.'
Choreographer Shane Shambhu, Dance 4, Nottingham, 2005.

The rhythm you use is a strong influence on the movement you can make.

Rhythm:

From a workshop in Sydney: 'There's a song that you sing when you watch dancing.'
Nalina Wait, Space For Ideas workshop, Critical Path, Sydney, 2005.

There's often a song that you sing when you dance.

Time:

Human beings like to share a beat.

Time

From 'Cheap Lecture':

We are trying to
perform in the
present, but you are
living
also the
past of
your
recognition and the
future of
your
expectations,
which are our
constant
companions.

With us, in the
room, are our
histories and
our hopes,
not least
the hope of a nice
meal and a
cold
beer.

With us are
all of the
people we have
spoken with
today.

With us
*
are all of the
people we have
spoken with
*
today.

This piece was
written and is
being performed in a
line
starting at the beginning
and continuing until the
end.
As soon as we
begin to
perform
however
time
begins to
riot.

What comes first
determines
what can happen
next, and what

happens
next
alters what has
come
before.
Our perception of the speed
at which time is passing
is completely shifted by a
darkened room and an
enforced state of attention.

Things appear to
either speed up
or,
alternatively, to
slow
down.
Composition
is what
happens in the
gap between
one thought
*
and the
next thought.
Meaning
arises
between things, and is
altered by their
relationship.

Flow is an
accident of the

attempt to
get from
one event to the
next event.
Things which
only flow
give us nothing
against which to
read the
flow.
*
*
Rhythm
is about
heightened
attention in an
open
field.
*

Think of
pulse and we
think of a
heartbeat,
boom boom
boom boom
boom boom

Or
perhaps we might
think of
walking,
boom boom

boom boom

When we dance to a
beat our
bodies
organise and
coordinate
themselves around the
rise and
resolution of each
moment in a
gentle
collaboration between
falling and
standing.
*

When we dance
together to a
beat
we are usually not
trying to
express ourselves
but
rather to
lose ourselves in a
field of
expression.
Most of the
world likes to
dance to a
beat. Most
of the

world likes to
dance to a
beat.
*
*

In the second part of the
evening
you may see us
dance,
perhaps, just a
little.
*

The rhythm you will
see when we
dance is
different to the
rhythm you might
hear.

The rhythm you will
see is
weaker and more
delicate than the
rhythm we
make when we
speak, or walk
loudly, or play
music and we must
try,
best we can
maximum strength, to
balance the two.

Things that
appear complex
when you
see them may be
rendered
simple when you
hear them, and
things that are simple
when you
hear them may become
complex when you
see them.
We call
these two kinds of
rhythm
visual rhythm and

aural
rhythm.
Placing these two
rhythms
together
creates the thing
called
choreography.

From 'Cheap Lecture' by Jonathan Burrows and Matteo Fargion, commissioned by Cultureel Centrum Maasmechelen and Dans in Limburg, 2009.

Abstract dance

Abstract dance:

Our tendency as audience is to perceive a dancer or live performer as a subjective entity, rather than as an abstraction. There is, however, a certain kind of dance performance that an audience will call abstract.

What makes a dance performance take on this quality of abstraction?

Abstract dance:

This abstract quality can arise by accident. Sometimes a dance fools itself into thinking it has a concrete subject, but doesn't find any subject other than the abstract.

'Abstract' is a fine subject, so long as that's what you want to do.

'When you do abstract, do abstract': this was said by the choreographer Emilyn Claid. It doesn't necessarily mean it will be abstract. Sometimes working consciously in the abstract is the best way to arrive at another subject.
Quoted by a workshop participant, Tanz im August workshop, Berlin, 2007.

How might you recognise what's really happening? Do you want your frames of reference to be readable, and by whom? How might you challenge the old frames of reference and still communicate? What would happen if you trusted what you were doing and left the rest to serendipity?

Or perhaps this quality of abstract in your dance comes from the focus of the performers, and the relationship they and the material have with the audience? What other focus or relation might be possible, and how might that alter what the audience perceives? (see also 'Audience').

Abstract dance:

'I got sick and tired of all that Purity! – Wanted to tell Stories': this is the artist Philip Guston, describing why he stopped painting abstract canvases and began to create cartoon-like images – a shift, late in life, which lost him a few friends but earned him his enduring reputation.
Quoted in 'Guston', by Robert Storr,
Abbeville Press Publishers, 1986, p. 52.

Abstract dance:

To find a point of communication in dance, whether abstract or concrete, isn't easy. The points of communication seem obvious when they arrive but are often the result of slow trial and error.

Watching other people's work can be misleading because we see only the moment when the communication fell into place, and not the slow accumulation and adjustment of meaning.

How might you recognise what's really happening?

Abstract dance:

Audiences like to watch a consciously abstract dance.

Audiences like uncompromising work.

Counterpoint / Formal elements / Difference

Counterpoint:

Strictly speaking, counterpoint is a musical term, whereas in dance we would tend to talk about relationship.

Relationship allows for the human, whereas counterpoint feels like it's abstracting us into a formal element.

Formal elements:

Formal elements exist in all art forms. Think of film editing. Film editing is a balance between intuition and formal techniques. Sequences of film, shot in real time, are cut together to create a rhythm and momentum that heightens the tension of the story and pulls our expectation forwards. These techniques have developed out of the limitations of the medium, and yet in the right hands appear limitless in their power to grip and surprise us.

When you get it right the formal elements are in balance with the more spontaneous elements. When you get it wrong the formal elements may unwittingly become the subject.

Or perhaps what you want is for the formal elements to become the subject?

Sometimes a formal element can best reveal the human, by distracting the performer from the desire to communicate, and the audience from the desire to be communicated to. (see also 'Subject' and 'Distracting the self').

Counterpoint:

Counterpoint can be a formal way to orientate yourself in relation to time by means of shared rhythm.

'Counterpoint assumes a love between the parts': this was said to me by the composer Matteo Fargion. I had always assumed counterpoint was about clashing.
From a conversation with the author, 2002.

Counterpoint:

A bit of clashing is not a bad idea.

Difference:

Clashing is about difference, and audiences like difference.

However, everything different makes everything the same. (see also 'Predictable and unpredictable').

Which suggests another possible definition of choreography: 'Choreography is about finding the most difference between materials, such that we see the difference but can still follow the plot.'

Counterpoint:

Counterpoint provides a way of writing or recognising a detailed connection in time and space between events. This takes rigour and patience to master. Some dancers enjoy this kind of work and some don't.

Counterpoint can also give you a momentary way to observe what you've done from a different perspective: what is happening when and against what, and in how that connection might help the viewer, or not, follow what's happening and not get bored.

Think, of course, of Bach – or think of the same story told from two different perspectives, which combine to make one much richer story – or think of a split screen moment in a film – or think of the way a beat is set up in a track, which is contradicted by another beat which seems suddenly to change the down-beat and double the tempo.

Trance activity.

Heightened attention.

Scores / Studios / Improvisation

Scores:

A number of different approaches tend to be grouped under the word 'score'. This can get quite confusing. Trying to understand the different possibilities may help you decide what you need to do, or not.

Scores:

It seems to me there are two main kinds of approach to the idea of writing a score.

In the first kind what is written is a representation of the piece itself, a template which holds within it the detail, in linear time, of what you will eventually see or hear. A classical music score works in this way.

In the other kind of score, what is written or thought is a tool for information, image and inspiration, which acts as a source for what you will see, but whose shape may be very different from the final realisation.

These two approaches can mix.

Both can arrive at structure, and both can arrive at strong image, atmosphere and colour.

Both can be written before, during or after you make the piece.

Scores:

A score is one way to get an overview of time and materials. It freezes time in a concrete form, allowing you to glimpse what can be hard to grasp perceptually in real-time experience.

It can provide a way to sense and adjust time, allowing you to see and shift the relation of materials over longer periods.

A score is a conscious way to distance you from the thing you're making or doing. It can mediate between the maker and the work, and also between the maker and the performer.

It can give you a more objective viewpoint.

This may or may not be useful.

Studios:

A dance studio is a hard place to concentrate, especially if you're working with other people who are waiting for you to decide what you want them to do. A score can help you find a way to do some of this work at home, in private, where you'll have more time to think.

Scores:

When a performer reads their score during the performance, it can help mediate between them and the audience. The score then represents, in a way, the piece itself, separate from the personality or desires of the performer. This can allow the performer to disappear at times, giving the audience space for a more direct and personal relation to the dance, music or text they're seeing or hearing.

Reading a score also acts as a distraction for the performer, providing a focus away from their own self-consciousness and fear (see also 'Distracting the self').

Scores:

Is it useful for you to work with a score, and if so, what do you want it to do for you?

Scores:

Every choreographer who works with scores seems to have developed their own approach.

Your score may consist simply of writing down what you're doing. This can help you remember the material, enough to make more without worrying about forgetting what you've already made. It makes it easier to move forwards towards new ideas, because your mind is not holding onto the old ones.

A score doesn't have to be a complicated thing.

Scores:

A score can also embody within it the principles and philosophy behind the work (see also 'Principles').

A good example of this is chance processes (see also 'Chance').

Scores:

Draw a score for two or three people walking to and fro across the space.

Indicate different speeds of walk and different lengths of pause at the sides.

Let the people move either individually, overlapped or at the same time.

The rate of change should change and be both predictable and unpredictable.

Make it the length of an Elvis Presley song.

Take fifteen minutes to draw the score.

Work out your score on paper, but don't practise it.

Wait one day and then give the score to another group to learn and perform.

Try watching two scores, either at the same time or overlapped.

Discuss what you see.

This is an exercise not a performance.

(See also 'Rate of change' and 'Predictable and unpredictable'.)

Scores:

Draw a score for three or four people standing still in the space.

Let them change where they stand.

Let the people move either individually, overlapped or at the same time.

The rate of change should change and be both predictable and unpredictable.

Make it the length of an Elvis Presley song.

Take fifteen minutes to draw the score.

Work out your score on paper, but don't practise it.

Wait one day and then give the score to another group to learn and perform.

This is the opposite of the previous exercise. In the previous exercise the subject was walking, and the standing came

in-between. In this exercise the subject is standing still, and it's the walking that comes in-between.

Discuss what you see.

Scores:

Sit still for three minutes with your eyes closed.

Dance a dance in your head, in real time, one thing after the next for three minutes.

Imagine movements not images.

Open your eyes and write down the dance you danced in your head. Take five minutes to write. If you can't remember everything, try writing what you do remember. Write in the order that you remember it.

Give the score to someone else to learn and perform.

Try watching two scores, either at the same time or overlapped.

What happens to the performer when they are given somebody else's dance?

(See also 'Distracting the self'.)

Improvisation:

Try improvising the above ideas and compare results.

What holds your attention and why?

When is it useful to map your performance beforehand and when is it useful to leave choices to the moment?

Are there times when it could be fruitful to do both, and how might that work?

You can't do everything.

Scores:

Make a score for two people, side by side, making movements which are as small as possible whilst still being visible from the other side of the room.

Begin by taking six movements each from something you have already made, and then shrink or translate them in any way necessary to render them tiny. Make a micro-duet with this material, using relationships of alternation, overlap and unison.

Include at least one moment of shared movement, one change of speed and one change of dynamic.

The rate of change should change and be both predictable and unpredictable.

Make it the length of an Elvis Presley song.

Perfect and practise the performance as you make it, without writing anything down.

Try showing it.

Shrinking the movement causes you to listen harder to the other person, which changes everything and becomes itself a very particular subject.

Remember, soft can still move fast, slow might be hard-edged and small sometimes speaks loudly.

Scores:

How you write or draw your score will become a part of what shapes your thoughts.

The paper you use will become a part of what shapes your thoughts.

Do the most obvious thing.

Scores:

If at any moment you have an impulse to do something which isn't suggested by the score, and the idea won't go away, then you must do it.

This is not compulsory: following the score is usually enough.

(See also 'Originality'.)

Scores:

Write a singing score for two people, using only one note. You can change the duration, colour or dynamic of this note.

Use relationships of alternation, overlap and unison.

The rate of change should change and be both predictable and unpredictable.

Make it the length of an Elvis Presley song.

Practise as you write the score.

Try performing it.

(See also 'Relation'.)

Working with sound is one way to perceive compositional relationships more clearly, especially if we are performing the study ourselves. We can hear the sound of our partner and ourselves at the same time, whereas it's harder to see two people's movements simultaneously and sense the relation.
The above score was borrowed from Matteo Fargion.

Scores:

Write a score for two people using only clapping and one word.

Use relationships of alternation, overlap and unison.

The rate of change should change and be both predictable and unpredictable.

Make it the length of an Elvis Presley song.

Practise it as you write the score.

Try performing it.

Scores:

Write a short text describing an incident where something wasn't said. Write only from the perspective of what didn't happen – 'it didn't rain, she wasn't wearing a large hat, etc.'

Take any words, phrases or parts of words from the score you wrote for the dance which you thought but never danced, and place them in an order which allows repetition and rhythm to arise.

Make a score for two people speaking, each of whom brings their versions of the two texts described above.

Use all or any part of any text, in any order, with relationships of alternation, overlap and unison.

Include at least one moment of shared text, one change of speed and one change of dynamic.

The rate of change should change, and it should be both predictable and unpredictable.

Make it the length of an Elvis Presley song.

Practise the performance as you write it.

Try performing it.

Working with words reminds us that concrete and abstract means of communication are sometimes closer than we think, and that we need not be trapped by either.
The above score was developed in collaboration with Adrian Heathfield, in a workshop in Dublin, 2009.

(See also 'Text'.)

Scores:

(See also 'Make six things'.)

Scores:

Julyen Hamilton said this: 'People sometimes ask after a performance, 'Is it improvised?', and I say, 'Well it was when I did it, but it's set now.'
Julyen Hamilton, from a conversation with the author, 2009.

Chance / Empty hands / Gamut of movements / Limitations / Laborious work / Philosophy

Chance:

Chance methods were developed by the composer John Cage and the choreographer Merce Cunningham.

They arrived at this idea by a slow process of work and discovery.

One of their initial ideas was to share what they called a 'rhythmic structure', a pattern of empty bars of time which they would fill in with music and dance.

This gave them a new way for the two art forms to come together under the same roof: equal, created simultaneously and informed by similar principles.

Here is the rhythmic structure from '*Sonata IV*' of Cage's '*Sonatas and Interludes for Prepared Piano*':

3/3/2/2 3/3/2/2 3/3/2/2
3/3/2/2 3/3/2/2 3/3/2/2
3/3/2/2 3/3/2/2
3/3/2/2 3/3/2/2

The musical bars are grouped into phrases of 3/3/2/2, and the phrases are then grouped into larger sections of 3/3/2/2.

Cage called this a micro-macrocosmic structure – the smaller shapes echo the larger shape.
This rhythmic structure by John Cage is quoted in James Pritchett's, 'The Music Of John Cage', Cambridge University Press, 1993, p. 32

Having noticed that it worked to share the same structure, they then tried doing it with two different structures, one for the music and one for the dance, each with the same duration.

In this way they discovered that the connection between dance and music could be in the process, without being in the detail, and yet still arrive at an event that made sense.

It was not an arbitrary clash of dance and music.

Chance:

The step to chance processes developed out of Cage and Cunningham's interest in Eastern philosophy, and in particular their discovery of the Chinese book of oracles, the '*I Ching*'.

Together they made a leap to the idea that they might, like the oracle, throw dice or coins to make decisions for them.

The outcome of these decisions remained, however, dependent on them asking the right questions in the first place.

Asking the right questions in the first place takes as much work as any other process.

Empty hands:

Chance processes are one way to have empty hands when you work. Empty hands means you don't hold so tight to the thing you're trying to make that you crush it.

There are other ways to relax your grip.

Here's another definition of choreography: 'Choreography is holding on just enough to guide what's happening without squeezing the life out of it.'

Empty hands:

John Cage: 'When you are working, everybody is in your studio – the past, your friends, the art world, and above all your own ideas – all are there. But as you continue painting, they start leaving, one by one, and you are left completely alone. Then, if you are lucky, even you leave.'
Quoted in 'Guston, by Robert Storr, Abbeville Press Publishers, 1986, p. 62.

Gamut of movements:

One principle Cage and Cunningham used was to write what they called a 'gamut', or collection of materials, from which they would make the piece, using a chance process to decide which one to use when. For Cage the gamut might consist of, for instance, notes or short harmonic and rhythmic patterns – for Cunningham, a list of shapes, movements or phrases.

Chance:

The chance processes used by Cage and Cunningham also set limitations on all the other areas of possibility. In the case of the dance this might include: who does what, going where, when, facing in which direction, at what level, going at what speed, and making contact with whom.

It's a laborious process.

Some people like to do this kind of work.

Limitations:

Limiting the amount of choice you have can be very liberating.

It can also be very limiting.

How much choice can you handle?

Laborious work:

Best, perhaps, to set yourself also a limit as to how much of this laborious work you'll do, before you decide to guess whether there might be a pay off at the end of it or not.

Is there an easier way for you to work?

Chance:

When you add it all up you have, in chance processes, a philosophy of working which chooses and structures

enough to let you get on and do what you do best, which is to choreograph.

Chance processes also arrive at what is now, in some ways, a recognisable texture: a field of sparkle.

There are other ways to set up a process that will help you to choose, and empty your hands.

Or what would happen if you had full hands?

What would be the most obvious philosophy of working for you?

Philosophy:

The philosophy of what you make, embodied in how you make it, will communicate itself physically.

It doesn't matter whether you want a philosophy or not.

Place or space?

Place or space?:

A dancer can cross even the largest stage in a very short time.

Watching a great performer dance gives one the impression that they could do anything, if only they chose.

But if you can go anywhere, how do you make us care that you go somewhere?

Place or space?:

The philosopher Susanne Langer said this: 'The primary illusion of dance is a virtual realm of Power – not actual, physically exerted power, but appearances of influence and agency created by virtual gesture.'
Susanne K. Langer, 'Feeling and Form', Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd, London, 1953, p. 175.

The space of dance has also something of this virtual quality, and of its power. The placement or shift of a person within the magnifying glass of a stage can approximate to a narrative or emotional force, even when there is nothing else to suggest it. A dancer can render the small space of a stage infinite. We watch and our bodies open in empathetic

response to the freedom we fleetingly believe we have perceived.

(See also 'Narrative' and 'Self-expression'.)

Place or space?:

When I asked the choreographer Philipp Gehmacher what it was he was doing when he worked, he answered by asking me the following question: 'When you crossed the stage, was it place, or space?'
From a conversation with the author, 2006.

(See also 'Relation'.)

Place or space?:

Every step arrives at a place.

If you care where you are then we will care also.

Audience / Facing the front / Confrontation / Humour / Failure

Audience:

There are a number of possible relations you could establish with your audience. Thinking about how you want to look and be looked at can help clarify why you might want to perform in the first place. It's worth not taking this for granted.

Let's be honest, when we talk about audience we're talking about ourselves. I am often an audience member, so anything I think or say about audience has to include me as a likely candidate. I can be difficult to please and I hate being patronised.

Sometimes I like to be pressed back into my seat by the sheer force of the thing unfolding in front of me, open-mouthed and emptied of thought. Baroque churches do this, also Pina Bausch performances and anything involving explosives.

On the other hand, sometimes I prefer to be invited, to be included and nudged into thought.

The relation with audience is a circular thing: I give the audience clues as to how they might sit and they, in turn, give me permission to relax and do best what I've come to

do. Sometimes that permission is slow in coming and sometimes, on rare occasions and for reasons beyond anyone's control, the permission never arrives. In those rare cases the audience is grateful to you if you fake it. It makes them feel less uncomfortable about what's going on (see also 'Contract').

It is, of course, possible to use the situation of the unreality of a theatrical stage to become something extraordinary. This is one of the greatest pleasures of performing or watching performance – to be invited to suspend doubt. It is also and equally valid and desirable, though, to choose sometimes for the ordinary. The audience like to see themselves up there. It is a pleasure equal to that of witnessing magic.

(See also 'Contract'.)

Facing the front:

Our thinking about direction is in constant negotiation with compass points and square rooms. Is there another way we could orientate ourselves in relation to the room we are in and the people who are watching?

The audience are usually in front of you and facing them is one possibility. It isn't, however, the only option, and it isn't a guarantee of communication.

The theatre director Jan Ritsema said this: 'You know if you dare to turn around and dance away from us we love to follow you.'
From a conversation with the author, 2001.

Confrontation:

Another way to meet the audience is to confront them.

Many performances veer intentionally or unintentionally towards this kind of face-off with the crowd.

When could it be useful to confront the audience and how might you understand best what is happening when a confrontation occurs, and why?

The strongest confrontation is gently conscious of its purpose.

It doesn't guarantee communication any more than facing the front.

Humour:

Laughter is the most obvious pleasurable response you can elicit from an audience; there's no mistaking it. You may have noticed, however, that in the inevitable human search for meaning a dance audience will latch on to anything humorous. It's a blessing and a curse.

For the performer the difficulty is in gauging what's happening when the laughter subsides. Are they still with you or not?

The writer Adrian Heathfield said this: 'The important thing is to find a balance between allowing the humour, and at the same time letting us know that underlying it there remains a serious proposition.'
From a conversation with the author, 2006.

The test is whether, in the wake of a laugh, you can dare to walk away from the audience and trust they'll still be there when you come back?

They want you to walk away: they need the space (see also 'Facing the front').

Humour:

Here is the painter Philip Guston, meditating upon an unexpected response to his paintings: 'When I show these, people laugh and I always wonder what laughter is. I suppose Baudelaire's definition is still valid, it's the collision of two contrary feelings.'
Quoted in 'Guston', by Robert Storr, Abbeville Press Publishers, 1986, p. 54.

'Laughter is the expression of a double, or contradictory, feeling; and that is the reason why a convulsion occurs.'
Charles Baudelaire, 'On The Essence Of Laughter', from 'The Painter Of Modern Life And Other Essays', translated and edited by Jonathan Mayne, Da Capo Press, 1986 (Phaidon Press Ltd, 1964), p. 156.

The laughter of a dance performance is a contrary thing, born out of a collision between the tension that arises in the absence of language and the release that comes with anything graspable.

Some dance pieces are funny, though laughter is not necessarily proof.

Failure:

It is often the attempt to do what you're doing which makes us intrigued; your occasional failure to achieve this goal simply keeps the stakes high.

'We say, "Raising the problem to the level of the subject"': this is a thought from the theatre director Tim Etchells.
From 'Parallel Voices' talk, Siobhan Davies Studios, London, February 2007.

Audiences like failure, so long as they know that you know you're failing. It allows an act of human recognition and empathy. Conversely, if you are uncomfortable with your failure, then we are likely to feel uncomfortable too.

Or perhaps discomfort is an important part of what you're doing?

Sometimes if you start out with the premise that you're allowed to fail, it actually helps you to succeed. This is another of the paradoxes of performing: by allowing for what might go wrong, you include and conquer it.

'There are no mistakes' is a useful starting point. It doesn't mean you will make mistakes.

Or this: 'If you feel self-conscious allow yourself to feel self-conscious.' Accepting self-consciousness is one possible alternative to putting on a cool look like a new set of clothes. Of course I'm frightened, there are two hundred people out there and adrenalin is pumping round my body.

(See also 'Principles', 'Virtuosity', 'Ballet' and 'Facing the front'.)

Audience:

The gentle aim of the following principles, written by the composer Christian Wolff, is to liberate both audience and performers alike:

– A composition must make possible the freedom and dignity of the performer.

– It should allow both concentration and release.

– No sound or noise is preferable to any other sound or noise.

– Listeners should be as free as the players.

Christian Wolff, quoted in 'Audio Culture – Readings In Modern Music', edited by Christoph Cox and Daniel Warner, Continuum International Publishing Group, 2004, p. 163.

Audience:

It should allow both concentration and release.

Audience

From 'Cheap Lecture':

How the audience
sit is
how we
should sit.
Please Lord let them
give us permission to
think ourselves invincible,

and bless the bourgeoisie
in the front row
towards whom
we lavished
incandescent
violence.

This is for
all the people
who ever had
to clap
trapped
at the end
of a show
we were in
they disliked,

we're sorry
it must have been
awful we're
sorry, it
must have been awful the

way time
passed
so slowly,
so
slowly,
it must have
*
been
awful.
The way
time
passed
so
*
slowly
*
*
We're
sorry,
it must have
been awful.
*
*
*
And every time
you closed your eyes
something happened which

made you think
you'd better look,
and you looked again, and
nothing happened.

The way
you grew
to dislike us,
not least because
some people
liked it

and clapped hard,
so you had to clap
just a little
to be polite, which
made you
dislike
  everyone.

From 'Cheap Lecture' by Jonathan Burrows and Matteo Fargion, commissioned by Cultureel Centrum Maasmechelen and Dans in Limburg, 2009.

Performance / Principles

Performance:

What does it mean when we use the word 'performance', and why might we want to perform?

At times it can be hard to conceive of any reason at all to walk onto a stage.

Performance:

What is your default performance mode?

What would happen if you challenged it?

What would happen if you accepted it?

Performance:

'Performance can sometimes be product': this was said by the choreographer Liz Aggiss.
From a workshop at Bodysurf, Findhorn, Scotland, 2006.

Performance:

Principles for performance can give you parameters within which to work without trying to control every detail. They

help to stop you over-reacting in the direction of criticism, and so prevent you from losing everything in the effort to control something.

Judging your own performance is a very subjective business, and trying to adjust your work in response to the comments or perceived reaction of others can be an experience that leaves you disorientated. How else might you ground yourself within the shifting parameters of what is happening onstage?

Performance:

Every performance has also the subject 'this is a performance', written larger or smaller.

Performance about performance is a fine subject so long as you know that that is what is happening, and it's what you want. Performance about performance might even provide a stepping-stone to another subject.

How can we know what these layers of subject revealed by our performance are, and when might it be useful to try and discover that, or not?

(See also 'Subject'.)

Performance:

The way we prepare to perform is premised upon our usual habits of preparation – our daily practice – which might not necessarily be the best way to prepare for the thing that we have to do. Then again, the wrong way to prepare

may, without our being aware of it, lead to the right performance.

Sometimes fooling ourselves can be useful.

Performances shift all the time. Our only work is to stay awake as these shifts take place. The shifting never stops until the performance is dead.

(See also 'Paradox'.)

Principles:

After one year of performing '*Both Sitting Duet*' a friend came along to a show who'd seen it before, and told us that something had changed. She said when she first saw the piece each idea had stood out, and she'd always been excited to know what might happen next, but this time it all just flew by in a blur and she lost interest. Matteo and I felt completely thrown. We asked ourselves, was it to do with her expectation being too high because she'd enjoyed it the first time? Or did she know too much what to expect now and so missed the element of surprise? What if we tried to correct the problem but made things worse? How would we know how to gauge it?

We spent that night talking in circles, at a loss to find out what, if anything, had gone wrong.

The next morning we found the list of principles we'd written to help us perform the piece, a set of notes that had been collected as we went along. We'd rarely read them again after writing them down, but they were there as a kind of

reassurance in the back of our performance scores. Among them we discovered two thoughts:

– 'Each part of the piece should be separate but give leverage into the next part.'

– 'The energy must come from the material, but not exceed it: it mustn't come from the piece itself.'

The first was about how to make each image stand out like a hammer blow and yet stay connected, the second was a caution against riding the piece like a wave in one headlong rush to the end. We went on that night with these two ideas stuck in our minds. Having them there gave us something to do other than panic. Within minutes we knew the air had come back into the piece. We hadn't even realised it had gone.

Some years later we replayed this story with another piece called '*Speaking Dance*', but this time in reverse: the person who came to see us couldn't find any connection at all between the things we were doing. This time we realised we had, by habit of the previous experience, been making everything we performed completely separate from everything else. We realised that what we needed to do in *'Speaking Dance'* was exactly the opposite of the earlier problem – what we needed to do now was to blur everything in one big wave of enthusiasm.

Sometimes what you need to do is panic.
Jonathan Burrows and Matteo Fargion, 'Both Sitting Duet' (2002) and 'Speaking Dance' (2006).

The marketplace / Earning a living / Administrating the work / Commissions

The marketplace:

Before you try to sell your work you might ask yourself the following questions: what is it that I want this work to give me personally? Whose opinions do I care about? Who are the artists I identify with and how do they survive? What does the marketplace look like from where I'm standing? How much do I need to do this work and what different ways could I support myself to do it? What will I do if nobody is interested in what I make? What else am I interested in?

It's OK if nobody seems to really get what you do; whatever it is that drove you to choreography in the first place will surface somewhere useful in the end, whether or not you choreograph.

Earning a living:

There are many ways to make the job of a choreographer work financially. What ways are open to you and what ways do you want to work?

The recommended career structures may or may not be useful models for you.

Each generation, by necessity, will find its own solutions, according to the economic situation they find themselves in and the way in which funding systems are operating (or not).

What balance can you find between the compromises necessary to keep body and soul together, and the freedom you need in order to do the thing that you need to do?

Networking furiously works for some people, but it's not the only way to sell your work.

Administrating the work:

There are a number of different models for administrating dance, and different choreographers need different approaches. Some people thrive under the pressure of forward planning and ambitious schemes for growth. Others feel more creative within a flexible context that can follow and respond to their shifting ideas.

A productive relationship between maker and facilitator involves a degree of sensitive give and take between creative and practical needs, allowing each to feed and shape the other. A deadline can be a very useful thing, and having someone who challenges your ideas in the right way, at the right moment, can help toughen and clarify what you want to do.

Artists can't survive without the network of people who facilitate and promote the arts. We don't exist in a vacuum and what we present to the public is in a constant state of dialogue with the contexts within which we work.

Administrating the work:

Organising a dance performance is time-consuming work. Try if you can to find ways to manage that time well. Most tasks will take as much time as you allow them. This is as true of administrating as it is of choreographing.

Administrating the work:

The politics of funding shape how choreographers are supported. This is unavoidable but can, to some extent, be negotiated.

How are you being supported? What kind of support would best feed and sustain your creative work?

The size of infrastructure you choose will help determine the relative balance between how free you are to work the way you need to work, and the extent to which you're able to raise money and build on what you do. Some people thrive within a large infrastructure, others need a more personalised approach.

Funding systems tend to encourage artists to absorb themselves within larger infrastructures because they're easier to assess, and are more visible to the politicians who fund the arts. Big infrastructures, however, don't necessarily produce bigger or better work, and your happiness and ability to function are, in the end, of greater importance than the political imperatives driving the decisions that affect you.

Longevity as an artist is also important, and is premised upon you having the right circumstances within which to

work. Finding the right circumstances takes some trial and error, and a good deal of intelligent compromise.

The marketplace:

If you make a piece involving a lot of people and a large set it will cost a presenter, theatre or festival more money to book you. You might get more opportunities to present your work if you keep it on a manageable scale. Solos and duets get picked up by the tail ends of festival budgets.

Then again a piece involving a lot of people and a large set may be just what a theatre wants and can afford.

We don't work in a vacuum.

How will you be happiest working?

The marketplace:

There is a hierarchy of scale in the marketplace that equates larger pieces with greater artistic vision. Many artists successful in creating intimate pieces are encouraged to expand, and many lose direction when they do.

Great pieces are not defined by scale.

Most of us by necessity begin by choreographing on an intimate scale, which informs and defines our vision of what we can make. William Forsythe and Pina Bausch, however, began working in large theatres early on, and continued to do so.

What way have you worked and what way do you want to work? If you do risk a shift in scale then how might you do it for the right reasons, and in a way that allows you to hold on to your inner vision of what you do and why you do it?

(See also 'Administrating the work'.)

The marketplace:

There are networks of theatres and festivals across the world that support new dance and performance work. These connections between individual dance presenters are a vital part of the way information about artists is disseminated. There are many dance artists, however, and it isn't always easy to be noticed or remain supported within the structures that exist.

What other structures and strategies might dance artists use to pursue their art form?

What approaches might you develop to allow your work to evolve in performance, despite having fewer opportunities to perform?

How do we find a balance between the recognition of iconic pieces and the space needed to allow other more fragile and impermanent kinds of work to survive?

The marketplace:

To sell your performance you will have to market it. What can you say about the performance without taking away

the need of the audience to have the space to work things out for themselves?

What image can you create to attract an audience without raising an expectation that can't be met?

How do you negotiate the demands of a marketing world premised upon a business model that may bear little relation to the reality of your context?

The marketplace:

Dance is fond of pushing itself to extremes: physical, emotional, virtuosic, transgressive . . .

This image both influences, and is to some extent a product of, the marketing of dance. The texts of marketing brochures for dance performances are full of the adjectives of extremity.

Sometimes it feels as though the art form is being squeezed hard for meaning.

Meaning arises in the most unexpected of places.

Sometimes meaning arises out of situations of extremity.

Commissions:

Commissioned pieces are one way for independent choreographers to have their work seen by a different and larger audience. Some people work well within the situation of being commissioned to make a piece, and some don't.

One of the potential difficulties of making a piece for somebody else's company is that the invitation to work usually comes from the director, and not from the dancers you will work with. What strategies might you use in this situation to help the dancers feel that the thing you do might be useful, interesting and personal to them, even if they don't yet know your work?

Often the director has commissioned you because they saw something else you made. What strategies might you use to find a compromise between the expectation raised by your previous work and the freedom you need to move forwards into new territory?

The way the commissioning company works will not reflect the way you usually need to work: it's likely, for instance, that the time allowed you to make your piece will be less than you are used to. How could you find a process for working which builds on what you do well and fits into the shorter rehearsal times normally allocated by larger companies?

The worst that can happen is that you fail.

It's only a stupid dance.

Administrating the work:

There is a received wisdom which rears its head occasionally and holds to the myth that artists are by nature disorganised creatures, prey to the anarchic energies of their imaginations and benefiting at all times from a strong managerial hand. Some people, it's true to say, may fit this picture, but

otherwise it's best perhaps to politely resist the myth where possible.

The marketplace:

We are told that dance is a minority art form loved only by a few, and yet there are many of us who feel passionate about this thing.

Here is my fantasy: perhaps the number of people who like dance performances is the right number?

Music / Collaboration / Silence

Music:

The traditional way, of course, is that the choreographer finds or commissions a piece of music and then choreographs to it.

This is by no means a bad way to go about things.

Music:

Whatever the music or sound you choose to work with, the most important thing is that you consider the relative weight of what we will see and what we will hear: loud music outweighs small movement and sound often dominates the atmosphere.

You can change the whole world of something by the music or sound you use (think of film).

Do you want the atmosphere of the music or sound, or is there another, more delicate but no less powerful atmosphere underneath, which is in danger of being squashed?

Music:

If you choreograph to the music you can build the relative weight of your movement exactly to the strength of the sound we will hear.

Aural rhythm operates differently on our perceptions than visual rhythm. The rhythm you hear is stronger than the rhythm you see.

One way to balance the force of the music and the force of the movement is to include silence.

Or you could adjust the volume.

It's frustrating for a composer to try and wrestle with this dilemma after writing the music. The process by which you work will affect what order things arrive in, which will either help or hinder your collaborator in finding the best balance. Is there a way you could you anticipate these things in the way you work together?

Or maybe the unexpected shift caused by the sudden arrival of new music will transform everything wonderfully?

Give it a week.

Collaboration:

If you work with a composer try to invite them into the principles of the way in which you're working. Explain the function you anticipate for the sound or music and hear their viewpoint before you both commit.

The moment of collaboration is the moment you ask the right person to work with you and then trust them completely (see also 'Collaboration').

Your collaborator, like you, can only do the best that they can within the limitations of who they are and what their experience is.

Don't expect the composer to cut and adjust their work to suit your needs – what they've made may lose sense if they start fiddling with the detail of it. Is there something you might adjust so that the movement and sound work together?

'Possibly you worked too closely and the dance and music became one – there was no friction.' This was said by the composer Matteo Fargion during a workshop in Scotland. *From a workshop at Bodysurf, Findhorn, Scotland, 2006.*

Sharing principles is a way to give space for each other's differences whilst still inhabiting the same project. Necessary friction is sometimes more interesting than polite agreement.

(See also 'Principles' and 'Collaboration'.)

Collaboration:

The first recording the choreographer begins to work with will form the foundations of the piece, and the emotional landscape of this recording will underpin the balance between sound and movement, and the meanings created. This first recording cannot easily be replaced at a later date by a better recording, without disturbing everything.

Or maybe the unexpected shift caused by the sudden arrival of new music will transform everything wonderfully?

Music:

Pop music will dominate what you make absolutely. Even if we don't know the track you're playing it will carry strong references of some kind for most of the audience. Is this the thing you need, and can you work intelligently within those references to arrive at something which becomes more than the sum of its obvious power to stir us?

Loud music will not give your piece more energy; we will only notice the lack of energy in what you've made. If you want more energy then make something energetic.

Music:

It is easy to create an atmosphere using sound or music.

The atmosphere created by sound or music can give the performance a sense of greater meaning, carried by the emotional landscape of what we hear. What is the meaning which you want to be carried? What meaning is the dance carrying?

There is a certain kind of atmospheric sound familiar to dance audiences. It usually manifests itself as a low industrial rumble with a vague sense of menace, as though something bad were about to happen. This kind of sound seems to have two functions: to hide the silence and to make the movement appear more evocative. It creates a strong contract with the audience that says: 'Something serious is happening.' It also

says 'This is contemporary dance'. It won't make what you do any more meaningful or serious than it is.

The audience will know if you are borrowing the emotion.

Silence:

Silence during a performance can be very uncomfortable for an audience; they can end up feeling like they're not allowed to breathe.

Is there a quality of silence which might extend a more open invitation to the audience? (see also Audience).

Or perhaps a tense silence is exactly what you need?

Silence:

Silence is no more neutral than nudity.

Text

Text:

Spoken language is the primary means of communication for most of us. When we choose not to speak in a dance performance we make a leap of trust towards other ways of telling.

Or we could choose to speak.

If you choose to speak, what does it reveal and what might it mask of the movement or images you're working with?

The text you choose to work with is in dialogue with the visual aspect of what you create. The most important thing is to consider the relative weight of what we will see and what we will hear: narrative text can make abstract movement seem light and incidental, and the delicate meanings we read in body language are easily buried under words.

'Writing or text always has a referent – something it refers to which can't be erased. There's something about this reference which carries a weight, and it can seem sometimes that it's more difficult to find that weight in the body.'
Adrian Heathfield, Impulstanz workshop, Vienna, 2008.

From a workshop in Vilnius: 'It's amazing how much physical power it takes to balance the movement against the words. It's like you have to move 80% and speak 20%.' *Carsten Burke Kristensen, NordScen workshop, Vilnius, 2006.*

Text:

When somebody speaks onstage it communicates to us in a particular way, different from that of movement or image.

What relationship to the audience does your speaking have, and how might that affect the other ways you want to communicate?

Speaking also makes time pass in a particular way, with a different continuity than that of movement. The meaning of a word pulls our imagination forwards, allowing long pauses for thought that are filled with the anticipation of what might happen next. The time of movement can seem slow and empty by comparison. It takes a lot of movement to fill a short amount of time, but even a few words can stretch out across a long space. '*Hamlet*' is a four-hour play that fits into a slim book.

What sense of passing time do the words give you, and how does that affect the time of your movements and images?

How can you balance all the elements and give each ingredient the room it needs?

(See also 'Language', 'Narrative', 'Continuity', 'Relation' and 'Audience'.)

Text:

In the agreed 'no talking' of a dance performance is a torrent of speaking, in my mind and in the mind of every one of the audience.

Text:

Text is sometimes useful also in choreography.

Text:

Text is no more or less communicative than anything else.

Text:

Text is no more or less meaningful than anything else.

Lighting / Technicians / Collaboration / Costumes / Shoes or no shoes? / Set design / Nudity

Lighting:

In most instances if you perform your work in a theatre you will need artificial light, or else choose to work in darkness; there is no escaping it. The question is: what do you want the light to do?

Theatre lighting is very good at presenting the audience with a reassuring look of 'theatre'. This is one possibility and it may be just the thing you need.

Or do you want the light to highlight the drama in your choreography? Will this help the audience to read what they're seeing, or will it confuse them?

Light can be very beautiful to look at. Is this helpful to you or not?

Do you want the light to be noticed at all?

Every style of lighting comes with an agenda, and it's up to you to figure out if it's useful or not. What do you want the audience to focus on, and what might distract them from that focus?

Lighting:

Theatre lighting is evolving all the time, but the possibilities are limited by the space you are in and the equipment it carries.

What can the available light do for you?

Technicians:

Some technicians are helpful and some would rather get the job done quickly.

Sometimes it helps to know what you're talking about and sometimes it's better to ask the technicians to help you.

It's probably useful to find out what different lamps can do, how they are hung, focussed, coloured and softened. A little knowledge is easily gained and goes a long way.

The intensity of lamps is measured as a percentage: if a lamp is too bright or dim ask the technician to lower or raise it 10 per cent at a time, and continue to do this until the light feels right. If it's almost right but not quite, then suggest an even smaller shift – say 5 per cent, or even 2 per cent. Try not to drive yourself and everyone around you insane while you do this. Almost right is usually good enough.

The technicians who work in a space know it better than you do; at the same time when you step onstage the public must believe the space belongs to you. Working with technicians is a constant negotiation of this paradox.

When a technician likes your show it's the greatest compliment you can get – technicians see a lot of shows.

Technicians:

After five hours of frustration every comment we made to the technician was greeted with a response which indicated clearly that he thought we had no idea what we were doing. We had lit the performance over one hundred and fifty times.

We came up with this idea, which I wrote down on the first page of my score for the performance and which reminds me, each time we set the performance up, exactly why we're there and what we must do. The idea was this: 'We don't know what we're doing and we're doing it.'

It was the composer John Cage who said, 'I have nothing to say and I am saying it.' It comes at the start of his '*Lecture On Nothing*', and is followed in the text by the words 'and that is poetry as I need it.' The statement is often understood as a provocation, but it is also a statement of humility and a pragmatic view on why poetry sometimes works when it does.
John Cage, 'Lecture On Nothing', from 'Silence', Marion Boyars Publishers Ltd, (1961) 1995, p.109.

'*Lecture On Nothing*' is a talk on composition first performed in 1950, using the same principles that Cage used for writing his music. You can find it in the book called '*Silence*'.

(See also 'Chance'.)

Lighting:

Light is a tricky thing to monitor because the pupil of your eye is contracting and expanding all the time to the new situation confronting it: a dark state becomes perceptually brighter the longer you look at it.

Work fast and trust your decisions.

There are many orthodoxies about how light should or should not operate in a theatre, but you can trust also your own sense of what you're seeing and what you want the audience to see.

The light will also affect how the performer feels and is able to operate on the stage. What is the optimum condition of light to allow the best performance in the most effective environment?

Lighting:

Changing the light refreshes the eye of the person watching, providing another tool to keep the audience focused. These changes add another voice to the counterpoint of events driving your piece.

How might the time and space of the changing lights find a common process and balance with the other elements?

Collaboration:

If you work with a lighting designer try to invite them into the principles of the way in which you are working. Explain

the function you anticipate for the light and hear their viewpoint before you both commit.

The moment of collaboration is the moment you ask the right person to work with you and then trust them completely.

Your collaborator, like you, can only do the best that they can within the limitations of who they are and what their experience is.

Whatever light you choose to work with, the most important thing is to consider the relative weight of the human presence of the performer within this landscape of artificial light. What has been delicately visible in the unimposing and familiar sanctuary of the studio can be radically altered by a sudden shift to the world of theatre.

Or maybe what you need is for it to be radically altered?

Costumes:

When you walk onto the stage are you presenting yourself or are you presenting someone or something else?

How might costume allow you to be both?

How might costume clarify or obscure you?

How might costume enrich or impoverish the physicality you are embodying?

Whatever you wear is a costume, the question is: what is the right tool for what you are doing?

The choreographer Liz Aggiss said this: 'For me performance is marked by the visual presence – I always know what I'll look like before I work, I don't dance before I know that.'
From a workshop at Bodysurf, Findhorn, Scotland, 2006.

Costumes:

If you work with a costume designer try to invite them into the principles of the way in which you are working. Explain the function you anticipate for the costumes and hear their viewpoint before you both commit.

The moment of collaboration is the moment you ask the right person to work with you and then trust them completely.

Or maybe just enough trust will do?

Collaboration:

When you invite someone to collaborate with you they will want to help you and will work hard to do so. It may be useful to discuss openly the parameters of the work before you both begin, in order to discover what proportion of weight of overall effect is appropriate for each part of the performance – choreography, sound, light, costume, set, visuals, etc.

Loud music outweighs small movement and a large hat is all that we will see.

Or maybe a large hat is what you want us to see?

Shoes or no shoes?:

What to wear on our feet can be a difficult decision. What we wear will affect how we move, but also how the audience can perceive the thing we present.

Bare feet are a signifier of contemporary dance.

Trainers and shoes are a signifier of contemporary dance.

Ballet shoes are a signifier of ballet.

High heels?

Nothing carries so much weight of image as the shoes we wear on our feet, or not.

What might we not notice? Or perhaps the image bestowed upon you by your shoes is exactly what you need?

Set design:

An empty stage is just as much of a statement as a large theatre set. What statement do you want to make?

If you involve a theatrical set then what is the function you want from it? Is it to help the narrative or theme of the performance, and if so in what way might it help? Or do you want your set to operate as a vehicle for the spectacular?

How much spectacle can you take?

The set will not do your work for you, but if you collaborate with the right set designer for the right reasons then the set might do the work which you want it to do.

Nudity:

Nudity will not do your work for you, but if you use nudity for the right reasons in the right context then it might do the work which you want it to do.

Nudity:

Nudity is no more neutral than a large hat.

Titles

Titles:

The title you give your piece forms a strong part of the contract you establish with the audience. It contains within it clues to help them read, understand and follow the unfolding performance.

This signpost given by the title might also be about reassuring the audience that they don't have to follow or understand at all, that they might allow themselves simply to experience.

A poetic title will not make your dance more poetic; it will only raise an image and leave it hovering momentarily until the dance either absorbs or washes it away. Think carefully if this is what you're really looking for.

The title you give your piece will also represent the piece in the mind of the departing audience, so it can be useful if they are able to remember it. Try this: don't write down the title you've thought of and see if you can still remember it after a week. What did you remember?

The title might also contain the concept or narrative in a nutshell, or point us towards the place where we will easily find them.

Observe the titles given to things you love and consider in what manner they are operating on your memory, intellect and imagination.

The title you give your piece while you are making it may not be the title it wants once it has been made.

The right title, once lodged in your mind, will probably refuse to go away.

The right title for the right piece becomes, in some way, invisible.

Filming / History / Collaboration / Mirrors / Human-scale

Filming:

A piece of performed choreography is an ephemeral thing, existing only fully in the moment of performance and then as a disintegrating memory in the minds of those who witnessed the event.

Filming, usually in the form of video, is one of the ways by which we try to preserve what we have made, but a film can go only so far in recording the event of a performance. A film of a performance is like a photograph of a painting, both reflect the thing they reproduce but remain nevertheless their own object, separate from the object they record and providing only a specific and restricted experience of the original.

Or perhaps it is a film that you want to make and not a performance?

Dance has always been a rich subject for the medium of film.

Some films of dance pieces are better than the original performance.

Filming:

Watching dance live is easier than watching it on a small screen: the tricks work better.

Great dance films find their own great tricks to keep us watching.

Maybe technology will change all this?

History:

By comparison with music, dance performance remains largely unbound by ever-present libraries of the historical canon. It easily forgets its own history and is therefore constantly in the process of reinventing itself, recast each time in a new body for a new decade. This is one reason dance remains one of the most experimental of art forms.

Here is the writer André Lepecki, paraphrasing the 18th century choreographer Jean-Georges Noverre: '. . . dance is so stupid because it constantly forgets; and is constantly being forgotten.'
André Lepecki, from 'Capitals', edited by Maria de Assis and Mårten Spångberg, Fundação Calouste Gulbenkian, Lisbon, 2004, p. 66.

'. . . works of this kind endure only for a moment and are forgotten almost as soon as the impressions they had produced': Jean-Georges Noverre.
From 'Letters on Dancing and Ballets' (1760), translated by Cyril Beaumont (1930), Dance Books Ltd, 2004, p. 9.

'Themes expressed in dancing are, for the most part, devoid of sense, and offer a confused medley of scenes as ill-connected as they are ill-ordered.'
Ibid. p. 16.

Sometimes stupid dancing is the thing you need to do.

Sometimes forgetting is the thing you need to do.

Filming:

People who curate the dance programmes of theatres and festivals can't always manage to see performances live, or else they want reminders of what they saw, so they like to watch recordings of the work. The online world and the offices of dance presenters are piled high with expensive dead recordings of half-watched dance pieces. Sometimes you get a performance booking from someone who only saw the work on video. At other times, however, you send your recording out into a deafening silence.

What is the balance between your need for a recording and the resources you have to make the actual performance? What do you want from your recording? What is the dialogue that might be possible between your performance and any other means of representing the thing which you've made?

What things about dance can a camera show well, and what is obscured by this dialogue with a secondary medium?

Or perhaps you want filming to be the primary medium?

It's always worth, from time to time, pausing for a moment to consider why we like to perform, or not (see also 'Audience' and 'Performance').

How else could you record your work? (see also 'Scores').

Collaboration:

Can the film or video you make share the same principles that have informed the making of the performance piece?

If you collaborate with a film-director then how can you involve them in the process behind the performance work, and negotiate best what allows for the best work in both mediums?

The moment of collaboration is the moment you ask the right person to work with you and then trust them completely.

Filming:

Projecting images onstage is another possible use of filmed material.

Filmed images carry a weight of visual impact, scale and reference that easily drown the poor human onstage with them.

How might you find a balance between the riches of video projection and the joyful poverty of the human-scale event?

Projection will do not do your work for you, but if you use it for the right reasons in the right context then it might do the work which you want it to do.

Filming:

Video also provides a way to look at what you're making as you make it.

Some work is completely lost on video. If you use a camera in the rehearsal room, are you prepared to accept what you might lose because it's too subtle to see on the screen?

How else might you try to see what you're making?

Or what would happen if you didn't look at all?

Mirrors:

The traditional way to monitor what you're doing is to watch yourself in a mirror.

There is a rhythm of phrasing and detail visible in a mirror that can, at times, make the making of dances into an absolutely fruitful dialogue with your own sense of timing.

When might it be useful to use a mirror, and when might it glue you so firmly to your sense of self that you fail to arrive anywhere else? How you focus in the mirror will influence, to some extent, how you focus onstage.

How do you want to focus?

Filming:

Don't watch your video straight away; best to wait a week until you've forgotten what you wanted to see. You might just be delighted.

Human-scale:

Human-scale is one of the most generous things that dance can offer an audience.

Hierarchies / Dancer or choreographer? / In it or out of it? / Who owns what?

Hierarchies:

The relation between choreographer and dancer is a difficult one, fraught with questions of control, ownership and collaboration. Dance has been trying to challenge these hierarchies since Judson Church, but it seems the dilemmas don't go away.

At times of stress in rehearsal it becomes easy for us to adopt habitual positions which reinforce negative hierarchies. The choreographer slips easily into the role of controlling teacher and the dancer assumes the passive resistance of the student, each triggering the other in a cycle which can be hard to break.

Learning new motor skills is an emotionally stressful thing, and the atmosphere of even the most fruitful of rehearsals can sometimes become tense (see also 'Technique').

How do we deal with this?

Hierarchies:

A choreographer often feels under a lot of pressure in the studio, to know what they're doing and come up with ideas.

The choreographer doesn't have to know everything about what they're trying to do.

It helps, however, if they know something about how they're trying to do it.

Some preparation beforehand can certainly be a good thing (see also 'Studios' and 'Preparation').

A dancer or performer can also feel under a lot of pressure in the studio, to be good at what they're doing and to come up with ideas.

How might each reassure the other that what they're doing is good enough?

Hierarchies:

Some students in Leicester suggested this to me: 'If you are the choreographer and you have found principles and a process to help you work, why not ask the dancers what principles or process might help them to help you do that work?'
Rebecca Downing and Claire Taylor, De Montfort University, Leicester, 2008.

Hierarchies:

Dancers often create material without being credited for their choreographic input. How do we define the role of the dance-artist who carries the title 'dancer', and yet creates material?

How do we define the role of the 'choreographer'?

Sometimes performers are called the 'translators' of other people's work. Is this an accurate description of the relationship between dancer and choreographer? What other description could we use?

Dancer or choreographer?:

Sometimes circumstances ask us to define whether we are a dancer or a choreographer – this often happens at some point during our training. What might a choice like that mean?

Would it help you to define your role now, or would you rather keep your options open?

In it or out of it?:

Some choreographers need to be in the work in order to stay focused. Being in it also gives you something to do so you don't drive everyone else mad.

On the other hand some people have the ability to focus better at a distance, and are blessed with the infinite capacity to watch. Or are you just a nervous performer?

What knowledge could be gained by embodying the process yourself?

What knowledge could be gained by remaining outside the physical process?

Who owns what?:

Dance, on the whole, is a generous art form. Many of us teach to make a living and we pass on what we know. Dance has a long history of shared information: think of ballet, hundreds of years in development passing from teacher to teacher, each contributing to what has become, for us, an object solid enough to seem ownerless.

What is stolen from you is usually transformed utterly in the stealing (see also 'Stealing').

What do you want to own? What might be useful to defend as yours, and what might best reflect on you by keeping your hands open?

How can I simplify all of this?

How can I simplify all of this?

Forget all this

These thoughts may or may not be useful to you. The thoughts that are useful to you have done their work already.

Trying to work too consciously with these ideas might confuse you more. Best perhaps to wait for an idea to spring out of nowhere in five years' time, just when you've forgotten that you knew it.

When you've forgotten these ideas they will have become yours and be ready to use.

The idea you need will spring out of nowhere when you need it.

Forget all this.

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Thanks

My greatest thanks extends to all the people who have joined me in workshops over the years, whose thoughtfulness, questioning and passion for the subject have been a constant presence during the writing of this book, and without whom it could never have been attempted. A special thank you to those who have allowed me to quote things which they said in a workshop, words which reflect the attempt to articulate difficult things.

To Kate Flatt, Matteo Fargion and Kevin Volans, who taught me about choreography and composition, and to Jan Ritsema, who taught me how to question.

Also to my wife Claire Godsmark, who has been patient and supportive throughout.

Matteo Fargion, Adrian Heathfield, Nigel Hinds and Chrysa Parkinson have given advice and encouragement while I was writing, and Julia Carruthers has been an always reliable repository of grammatical sense. The following people also helped me to find or clarify things: Ramsay Burt, J. Lesley Crow, Nik Haffner, Christopher House, Fionnuala and Máire Ní Chiosáin, Kristy Nilsson, Daniela Perazzo Domm, Adam Roberts, Remo Rostagno, Noémie Solomon and Philip Thorne.

Respect and admiration to the artists whose thoughts I've borrowed – for their work as much as for their words.

I have been a collaborator with the following people and companies on various projects over the years, and their artistry, intelligence and commitment have been the bedrock of my explorations: Peter Abegglen, Gaby Agis, Ballett Frankfurt, Emily Barney, Lynne Bristow, Rosemary Butcher and Company, Joe Casely-Hayford, Richard Dean, Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker, Extemporary Dance Company, Matteo Fargion, Dana Fouras, Susana Garcia, Neil Geraghty, Craig Givens, Sue Glasser, Hugo Glendinning, Claire Godsmark, Douglas Gould, Kate Gowar, Sylvie Guillem, Jack Hazan, Luke Heydon, Wendy Houston, Michael Hulls, Deborah Jones, Tom Johnson, Akram Khan, Andy Klunder, Edward Lambert, Liz Lauren, Thomas Lehman, Mark Lorimer, Edwin Lung, James Macdonald, Tina MacHugh, Natalie McCann, Ross McGibbon, Henry Montes, Chris Nash, Peter Newman, Michael O'Hare, Ragnhild Olsen, Ashley Page, Chrysa Parkinson, Fionuala Power, Gillian Revie, Simon Rice, Jan Ritsema, Adam Roberts, The Royal Ballet, Sadlers Wells Royal Ballet, Beverley Sandwith, Robyn Schulkowsky, Jeremy Sheffield, Dudley Simpson, Kirstie Simpson, Ronald Smedley, Herman Sorgeloos, Spiral Dance Company, Ian Spurling, Judy Stedham, Timothy Sutton, William Trevitt, Ravenna Tucker, William Tuckett, Kevin Volans, Fin Walker and Nicholas Wilson.

A huge debt of gratitude to the three people who have managed my work over the years: Alpha Hopkins, Julia Carruthers and Nigel Hinds.

Thank you also to the following individuals and institutions who have supported my research in many generous ways: John Ashford, Christopher Bannerman, Val Bourne, Assis Carreiro, Guy Cools, Dance 4, Oonagh Duckworth, Leslie Edwards, David Gothard, Jane Greenfield, Greenwich Dance Agency, Betsy Gregory, Guy Gypens, Hugo Haeghens, Rebecca Hanson, Walter Heun, Simon Jackson, Amanda Jones, Kaaitheater Brussels, Brendan Keaney, Kunstencentrum Vooruit Gent, John Mitchinson, Norman Morrice, Stephen Munn, P.A.R.T.S. / Rosas Brussels, Karl Regensburger, Johan Reyniers, South Bank Centre London, Alistair Spalding, Theo Van Rompay, André Thériault and Peter Wright.

Biography of the author

Jonathan Burrows danced for many years with the Royal Ballet in London before leaving to pursue his career as a choreographer. He is known internationally for a body of work including the film '*Hands*' with Matteo Fargion and director Adam Roberts for the BBC/Arts Council (1995), '*The Stop Quartet*' (1996), '*Weak Dance Strong Questions*' with Jan Ritsema (2001), and '*Both Sitting Duet*' (2002), '*The Quiet Dance*' (2005), '*Speaking Dance*' (2006) and '*Cheap Lecture*' (2009) with Matteo Fargion. He tours widely with his performances, winning a New York Dance and Performance 'Bessie' Award for '*Both Sitting Duet*' in 2004. He has made commissioned work for William Forsythe's Ballett Frankfurt, Sylvie Guillem and The Royal Ballet, and been an associate artist at Kunstencentrum Vooruit in Gent, London's South Bank Centre and Kaaitheater Brussels. In 2002 Jonathan was given an Award by the Foundation For Contemporary Performance Arts in New York, in recognition of his ongoing contributions to contemporary dance. He is a visiting member of faculty at P.A.R.T.S., the school of Anne Teresa De Keersmaeker in Brussels, and his Visiting Professorships include the Department of Drama and Theatre at Royal Holloway University of London and the Performance Studies Department at the University of Hamburg. He currently lives in Brussels.

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