

Open discussion with Eva Karzcag, Jane Carr and Kate Brown as part of Winlab 2006 Festival

Part 2 – Improvisation and somatic practice within Institutions

Eva - Jane was talking about how there is Experiential Anatomy in certain courses or improvisation in certain schools...

Jane – Yes I was thinking about the difference between what starts by linking in to a whole different way of 'being', and what becomes a timetabled subject. I have students who have studied ballet and Release, and they can choose to write about those techniques (ballet, or Release or Cunningham) and I'm interested to see how a technique evolves, how it changes.

K – You were also talking about, from your perspective, it feels that this body of work is more obvious to you now for example from being in colleges, and is that true and why.

J – I think that is a question because I have been so burrowed away in my own little world, only peeking up to see what's going on, so I can't quite work out whether...there seems to me to be more improvisation or more awareness of somatic technique generally. I'm not quite sure if it's just I've woken up to it or whether it is something that's beginning to consolidate at least in Britain. I just wondered how people felt.

- Definitely. And not just in Britain.

E – Yeah I think it's worldwide and I have the feeling that some of that is happening because people are realising that actually, it does work. That when you enter the body somatically, certain changes happen and people can do their plies better, they can point their feet better etc. Although I do have a question about how students do ballet, pulling up, and then go and do Release, and then pull up when they do ballet again – how productive is it?

- I think there's a healthy tension of somatic practice and also the growing dance science department, and also how we balance that in a timetable, do we need both, and which approach are we identifying as ours.
- What is dance science? Is it a course?
- I don't know, I have my own impression of it - there is quite a growing dance science department there (Laban).

J – It's an MSc.

- Yes and it's also being integrated into the BA programme in terms of fitness and injury prevention.
- There's a sort of ...
- attention to classicalness you mean?
- No not necessarily, I think it has a bit of affiliation to sports science in the sense that the way they're evaluating or analysing/measuring the body. But that doesn't mean to say they're not looking at the body somatically, because they do.
- Yes as sports sciences are increasingly doing that. And these experiments in improvisation for athletes – that kind of thing, they are increasingly going that way.
- So perhaps there's a bit of a crossing over, that's evolving as well.
- But the reason I mention it is just trying to give students the experience of everything and how confusing or useful (that can be) or is it the different stages in their lives that

I think they find difficult. They find it refreshing as well, to go from Release to fitness to Ballet

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- – Yes for example, I've just finished my degree at Laban. I found it very often confusing because my body didn't have time to digest messages. But I was changing before I could taste what I was doing, that means I stayed very much at this surface because I was rushing through everything. I could feel that I didn't use my body efficiently, I could sense it without being able to get there, which was a huge amount of frustration. I felt I was abusing or forcing my body and not have the choice not to do it because I'm not given the time to work it thoroughly. I found that there was, this is just my own opinion, that there was a lack of depth in physical work and also staying longer in something, which would have been useful for me.

K – Maybe that's the other side of it, that is this bodywork that we're talking about, is it being compromised by being taught just after Ballet? The lengths of time that we spend each week, the amount of time we're allowed or offered to stay with one idea or one physical state. Everybody has said that is very important in terms of the depth of understanding. So I think that sort of flips – one side is what's it like for the students and their bodies, and the other is what's it like for the work to be put into an institution. Yes, it's great everyone's learning Contact, but is it great if...

J – I think every single department grew like that. We all want more time for depth of experience.

E – But then maybe choices need to be made as to how many subjects are included. For instance at the beginning at EDDC, we taught using a workshop plan so students would have 6 to 8 weeks with one teacher. If the person dealt with training their own body, the students would have morning training with them, then in the afternoon workshop they had the opportunity to put the training into practice. It was rather like a company situation, with a choreographer, so you could really get into the mind, or the mind-body of the artist you were working with. Which is very different to having an hour and a half class, which is nothing. The other thought I had was it seems very important that people realise that to be an independent dancer is a choice. It's not that one is a failure at something else. The commitment to doing this body of work as opposed to another body of work is a choice. When I first started exploring Release and Improvisation, one of the great things about being independent and not training at an institution was that I could make a choice when I felt conflict in my body, when my body didn't know how to deal with both ballet and Release, because this was asking for one thing, and that was asking for something else. I could say I don't want to do that, I want to focus my attention only on this body of work. And then my interest just helped me dive deeper and deeper into it, and explore different facets of it, rather than have to deal with this other thing, that I was wanting to move away from, at the same time.

- Did you do that alone? Or with others when diver deeper into it?

E – Well, at first I did it as part of a group. At the time when I made that decision for the first time I was working with Strider in London, with Richard Alston, and Dennis Greenwood. And then when I made that choice again I was in New York, where I started out taking classes at the Cunningham Studio and quite quickly decided that actually that wasn't where my interest was any longer, so I gravitated to the Downtown dance scene and worked with a lot of different people. And of course while working with Trisha (Brown), my training was primarily Alexander and other body work, Contact classes or jams, sometimes workshops with people like Simone Forti, Bonnie Cohen Trisha's background is traditional, and a major part of her un-doing of that was through Elaine Summer's Kinetic Awareness work.

K – Coming back to Jane's question, it seems to be agreed that this (improvisation/somatic work?) is more integrated into institutions now but why....(to Jane) you can say your question.

J – I'm curious, (now that I've just woken up to it), but if there is more of this work around I was wondering, whether at a deeper level that says something about what dancers or even their audiences want from dance. This interest in something more connected, more

immediate. And I was just wondering about this, as in a sense you were talking about that immediacy and humanness being something that attracted you. So my question is for most people, is that what has attracted them to improvisation, or does anyone have a radically different interest?

K – Meaning in which that's why the more people who know about, the more they want to know, and it does have that appeal.

J – Yes I suppose that there is something about this immediacy and connectedness that is attracting and it's attracting more people. And I'm just curious – I have my own thoughts as to why it is that this is happening now when most of our lives are so much pulling the other way, and whether if that's what's attracting people, and I guess it would be good to test it out.

- - Yes I think it has something to do with how improvisation gives the chance to join in at any stage, and to grow with it, and you don't have to fight with being older. I think it's beautiful and it has space where in traditional techniques it's more exclusive. Therefore if you want to dance, and you're older, how is that possible? So in improvisation the training is more approachable even if you don't have traditional training I think you can find very particular ways of moving and communicating and hopefully communicating with everybody else, while for example in Ballet, I don't see there being any chance because the body is stylised.

E – I had another thought here that choreographers are realising that improvisation is a really fantastic tool for sourcing and developing material. And I think, probably choreographers are finding that dancers who know how to improvise are much more valuable when making a piece, since they're able to contribute more, and in more interesting ways, to whatever is being created.

K – And then as well as part of that thought, that the way the work is being absorbed into more mainstream performance – sometimes it can feel that you're watching a piece and suddenly you see like one little contact spin lift thing, and you think: What are they doing, ruining that bit? I've experienced a sort of quarrel with that, in terms of, well they've taken the look of it, but they're just using it as a sort of...

- ...style

K - Yes, exactly, the style, or a piece of vocabulary like that – let's put one of them in. So I suppose that's a similar question isn't it – the clarity or the original intent of the work of exploration and constant change, expansion, development and availability, is that being compromised?

J – I was just wondering whether in some ways that happens to a lot of dance – that it encapsulates bodies at a certain time, as I'm sure people have said that about Ballet or Graham...they've just got the shape of it! So I guess maybe that is how as time has gone on, like in a lineage, something maybe begins to happen with the way of working. But then is it more that because it's a process, the form can change. Can you prevent that [the compromise] from happening?

K – Yes well I think the absorption into the mainstream probably happens with everything, like you see punk songs in adverts, so yes it's not unusual. It's just a question of how to...

J – So I guess like we were talking about, within the form in which it was originally developed, and trying in some ways to stay alternative or counter to something, how do you prevent yourself becoming absorbed? And I guess that goes back to what you (Angela) were talking about- incorporating techniques and is it about getting back into your awareness or...?

- – I think from how I experience improvisation, there are some techniques where I can get a more clear idea within my body, I just think how I use it can be more efficient, and it opens possibilities to going back to this present state, or being available, it just makes so much more sense.

– I wonder if it's culture as well in that sense, or not the word culture, but there's a time when things go in phases, like a feeling or need to feel connected or closer to self. And yes it's a technique for performance or for making work, for preparing the body and also, I'm equally committed to it now, even though I don't plan to perform. I just want it for my life, for my own growth, and I wonder if that's also why there's an increase/hunger or curiosity for this kind of work in the same way as there is for meditation. We're all over-loaded, over-stimulated, distracted, busy.

- But I think there's a difference for example, in some forms of yoga, something that still has instruction, to foresee those body-mind connections. I feel that with improvisation there is a certain freedom, that you aren't dependent, you make your own choices, there is nobody to tell you what to say, or what to do, so you have your own responsibility.

E – But then we also have to learn how to work with that responsibility. We've talked about present-ness or presence, and we've talked about availability, but I think in the practice of improvisation there is the learning of real-time composition, for instance, or the practice of working with tasks, which I think is very different from someone saying: this is improvisation, we just stand up and do it. There's actually extensive practice that goes into creating an improviser.

- It's also a real way of addressing time and being present in time, and that's such an issue for our contemporary living. It's about being in time and space, virtual communication and time spinning by. It's obviously a way of addressing that.

K – And this relates to being an independent dancer also, the absorption into more mainstream, and the choice to remain on the fringe, really, to make work with small groups of people, or to not form a company for example, but continue to make work. The fact that that being a choice rather than failing to be professional maybe, or something like that, which, sometimes is implied by various bodies who give out money. I don't know what people feel about that. I appreciate you saying your interest isn't about performing, but there are a lot of people who are interested in performing who continue to keep out of the... (to Eva) Do you have any thoughts?

E – I have many thoughts. I started out in very mainstream situations and often when I tell people that I left Trisha because she was getting to be too successful, they look at me in a funny way. But I felt that she was actually sweeping me back into a situation I had come from. I felt that her work was becoming so successful, and getting performed in such large venues, that the subtlety and detail that was there in more intimate situations, was getting lost. It makes a big difference to me, that I perform to an audience that is very close to me. I like it. Maybe that goes back to how, coming from being involved in spectacle, I found these early performances, where I saw the humanness of the performers, so moving. So yes that's very important to me that being an independent dancer is seen as a choice and I think about it a lot. I don't think it's an easy choice to make because it's never easy to struggle for a living, and I feel I've been among the lucky, for being able to live off of what I do, where many of my friends often had to do other things to be able to survive and do the dancing work that they wanted to be doing.

K – So this brings us to another question of yours, Jane, about whether that existence is harder.

J – Yes, from reading student essays, where they're writing about contact improvisation, somatic techniques and the time that they've developed. And I was thinking – how much harder is it to do that now since the 1980s, with the big factory era, and the commodification of everything. My impression is that it's probably harder, if you're starting off now. I think about our students finishing and saying they want to be an independent artist, and I wonder if there's a romantic view towards Steve Paxton or something?

E – I think it's both harder and easier, I think it's harder because there are more pressures and people are expected to produce slicker and more presentable...

- ...the surface of their work is expected to be more finished

E – Yes. But I think it's also easier because there's a bigger community. When I was starting to do this kind of work there were very, very few of us.

- Do you think that colleges are generating too many graduates in fact that there are too many people who are practitioners for the audiences to support.
- I think that's horrible ..????
- I hate that when people say that.

K – But it's a question isn't it.

- Yes, it's just that I work as a designer, and one of the criticisms I have is of the pressures the government puts on institutions of further education to pressurise them to generate more graduates, and the country doesn't need that many designers. Does it actually need that many dancers? Can the economy support that many dancers? Are the students being sent out into the world with expectations that the world will never ever meet?
- Yes but an education is just an education, isn't it? It's not that anyone that does a degree in something is going to be that.
- No it isn't, but if they're being sent out into the world with expectations that it is possible for them ALL to be dancers then there must be an awful lot of them that are going to be bitterly disappointed and actually feel that their lives have been severely fed up as a result of that because nobody ever told them that it wasn't going to be possible.
- There are a lot of issues there and I think a lot of people DON'T expect to be dancers...
- Yes....an English degree I don't see why a student can't just do a Dance degree, in that way.
- Yes well if you're doing it because that's what you want to do, but it's just a matter of the expectations that come out at the end of it that concern me. And it's a case not only in dance, but with a lot of other creative activities, that they are commodified, and the government views it as a set of targets that have to be met. And they're not interested in what actually happens after those targets have been met.
- But I was thinking that it's not that you do it because you...it's something you just do because this is how you enter a world - this is why you do it, and you will find your way to do it. And this might be very different from how it was when you started, but if this is your approach towards the world, then this is your approach, and you do it, because you do it. That's it.
- Isn't it also true that the more people that are educated in dance the bigger the audience and therefore the more dancers we'll need, and so if you just keep on, if it grows and grows and grows, it will accommodate itself.
- I still have the same question about whether, just in terms of actually doing it to make a living, a body of population can only support a number of people who are dancing for a living, and how many of them it needs.

- But if that society places dance as very important, then it will need a lot of dancers, and the more people that learn it, the more important it will become within the culture. It's only because our culture – if it were stockbrokers, there would be no problem, we'd have lots of them, because that's what the culture is, so if we keep feeding it into the culture, it will accommodate itself.
- – But the economy has to work, somebody has to be producing commodities that are going to be sold and that part of the economy has to be functioning as well. If people are dancing they're not doing exactly those things, I'm just saying there needs to be a balance.
- But the economy as we understand it will never work for dance. And it never will. We have to separate it out because it doesn't produce anything that works within our idea of an economy, in the capitalist idea.
- But I would say that's because the measures that are being implied are inappropriate measures. It is possible to measure the value or worth of what any cultural activity has. But those measures aren't applied effectively and then fed back in. It still doesn't answer my question. I'm sorry, I still think too many colleges are being forced to produce too many people.

E – I think we could pose a question about what kind of education dance education tends to be. If dance education remains very narrow with the aim of creating dancers who then go into companies and the traditional dance workfield, then I think your question is very valid. But I think if dance education opens its doors out and educates people to understand themselves, to understand their own creative process, and creative process in general, helps them learn how to make choices, how to be independent thinkers, then even if not all of them will choose to go into the dance field, whatever other creative endeavours they enter, will draw on the education they got, and will include an embodied understanding of moving. To me, that's the direction that I'd like to see dance education go, and I see around me people who are thinking in that way. Hopefully some time, those older models will be outmoded.

- As I was saying, it's to some extent to do with the expectations of the people that are being sent out from places that they've been trained.

K – I think there are two things – one is that probably a lot of people that study dance have always not become dancers because it's always been a very competitive field. But also it's a question of where the decision comes because, for example, me, I tried to get into Laban and The Place when I was 18, and didn't get into either of them and was really fortunate there was such a thing as Middlesex Polytechnic, before they were abolished and turned into universities. But if that choice was made then that 'I'm sorry you can't be among us the elite' then I don't know what I would've done. I would've had to get a job, or you know. So who knows which students will actually go on to become dancers? And there's no point where you can go, 'Right you won't, and you will'. It's a sort of evolving question. So some people I went to college carried on for a few years and then stopped. While some people are still doing it, and it wouldn't necessarily be obvious during the time I don't think. It's to do with all other kinds of circumstantial choices.

- I trained in Design, and one of the people who I graduated with is one of the most successful designers, and actually he went to university to do Economics, and not Design at all, and changed his mind after a term realising he did the wrong thing. And at 18 no one would have predicted that that's what he was going to do because it wasn't even what he thought he was going to do himself. So yes I don't think making a decision at 18 can have any way an effect.
- I just think that institutions probably don't aim to make artists or dance artists. I think it's more to facilitate who can become an artist as I don't think you can really teach someone to become an artist. And I know from like Visual Art, that they're aware that very few are then becoming artists because it's got to do with your personality and the way you want to live your life.

J- I was thinking about the numbers thing, because I remember coming out of dance college and people maybe setting up companies. But what was really sad was that perhaps because it wasn't supported, it seemed to get competitive quite quickly, because in some ways of the sheer numbers. I'm not saying everywhere, but maybe in some ways the smaller communities can be tight-knit in working together. And maybe with the larger numbers coming out there is more competition already and immediately. And I think it's also about a sense of agency. Some people have that sense that they CAN make something happen, and will make something happen, and it will work out. And that's interesting and I think some artists have that and that's what keeps them going.

The discussion then moved briefly on to the funding of improvisational work and the issue of improvisational work being less likely to be funded. Some thoughts on the reasons for this were:

1. Process based, collective, work is inevitably going to be a challenge for a funding model that developed around meeting the needs of more hierarchic companies delivering clearly defined products.
2. Issues of authorship and the desire for 'society' to have a clearly defined single 'author' of a piece rather than a group collaboration.
3. Difficulties for artists who do improvise in groups to be able to agree contracts or describe effectively before the event.