

Rebecca Hilton

DANCERNESS

A lecture written by Rebecca Hilton, spoken in unison with Alice Heyward, Ella Meehan, Ellen Davies, Megan Payne and Chloe Chignell. Presented on November 5, 2014 at the Australian Centre for Contemporary Art (ACCA) in the context of Helen Grogan's Specific In-Between (the Choreographic Negotiated in Six Parts) as part of the Framed Movements exhibition curated by Hannah Mathews.¹

Hello I'm Becky. Ella, Alice, Megan, Ellen and Chloe are reading this with me. I've invited them to join me for several reasons, the first being that I want to talk about something I call DANCERNESS, which is something we all share, and secondly I didn't want to stand here by myself, and thirdly I think our voices in plural give a kind of manifesto vibe to what I've written which I'm not totally opposed to.

I would like to emphasise that it's very possible that Ella, Alice, Megan, Ellen and Chloe may not agree with everything I'm saying but they are gracious enough to say it with me tonight. If anything comes up we'll talk about it over dinner later. I'm also aware that six people talking at once will be strange and challenging to listen to but I don't mind strange and challenging at all. I am a contemporary dancer.

My subject this evening is DANCERNESS. Not the dance, or the dancing, or the choreography, or the concept, or the academic text explaining it all, but DANCERNESS. DANCERNESS is the very particular way/place/state from which a dancer experiences a dance, the choreography, the world. I've been thinking a lot about how unremarked upon, even unrecognised, dancer knowledge—DANCERNESS, is. Dancers think, feel and act upon the world in a particular way.

This idea swung into focus for me early last year when I was performing *Untitled*, a Xavier Leroy piece. It was a part of *13 Rooms*, a Kaldor Public Art Project. Hans Ulrich Obrist and Klaus Biesenbach were the total rock star curators of *13 Rooms* and I heard their spiel quite a few times at various events. It was funny and engaging, but they always said this one thing that really stuck in my craw. They described all of us, the over 100 interpreters (most of whom were dancers), as "sculptures that go home at night.". Dancers are not sculptures that go home at night.

So this got me thinking about the deep embodied knowledge that dancers have, not choreographers, not visual artists working with choreography, not spectators, not curators, but the knowledge that dancers have in their bodies and in their minds. The DANCERNESS.

How does DANCERNESS fit into these “Framed Movements” so prevalent today in galleries and arts institutions all over the world? Maybe DANCERNESS goes unnoticed because it’s actually a totally different way of experiencing the world, one that has nothing to do with generating product, or framing content or market forces.

Maybe DANCERNESS has gone unacknowledged because dancers are not so good at thinking or talking about DANCERNESS in an ‘effable’ way. Maybe the ineffability of DANCERNESS itself directly relates to the difficulty we have in articulating it? Maybe we dancers actually experience the world in an ontologically different way?

Which reminds me of something John Berger wrote about Jean-Michel Basquiat. Some of the things he writes seem very transferable to the way I’ve been thinking about DANCERNESS. Like this:

Basquiat chose a different strategy. He sensed that hidden truths cannot be described in any of the languages commonly employed for the promotion of lies; he saw every official language as a code for conveying false messages. His strategy as a painter was to discredit and split open such codes and to let in some vibrant, invisible, clandestine truths—like a saboteur. His ploy as a painter was to spell out the world in a language that is deliberately broken—ontologically broken.

I love how that interpretation of Basquiat’s work speaks to the inappropriateness of using the language of the oppressor to describe the sensation of oppression. I am perhaps being a touch dramatic.

So I have dug around and found some other writing from other places, about other forms, that seem, to me, like small portals into this understanding of DANCERNESS.

Manny Farber is a film critic who wrote an essay “White Elephant Art and Termite Art” in 1962. I just reread it for the first time in ages, and I realise that over time I have nudged it little bit over into my territory. But the sentiment of it remains the same. White elephant art is egomaniac art, something that is big and demanding and sits there like an expensive anachronism, immediately dated because it is so concerned with surface and fashion and attention. Termite art is the art that is for always and forever, a way of thinking and being in the world rather than an object or a product. You can perhaps guess where I think DANCERNESS lies in this spectrum. As Manny Farber says:

The most inclusive description of the art is that, termite-like, it feels its way through walls of particularization, with no sign that the artist has any

object in mind other than eating away the immediate boundaries of his art, and turning these boundaries into conditions of the next achievement. (Farber 1998, 135–36)

We termites work away, eating our frames, as Manny says, in a state of constant and continuous change, and I imagine one day that everything, all the white elephants and all the constructs holding them up will collapse, the structural integrity having been undermined by all the ongoing termite action. And then we will start all over again, in and around and on the ruins. DANCERNESS will make that okay for us. We will thrive in those conditions. We are “A Continuous Project Altered Daily” (after Yvonne Rainer, after Robert Morris), we welcome change, we practice for it.

The actor Robert Mitchum is someone who doesn’t come up so much in talks about contemporary dance but here he is in this one. You’d probably recognise him if you saw him, cleft chin, faraway gaze, usually plays a morally conflicted character. He dies a lot in movies. In an essay by Dave Hickey, Mitchum said something that I think of in relation to so many things in my life, things artistic and ethical, he said that when he picked up a gun in a movie, he made sure to hold it for a moment, to let the weight of the thing register in his hand; the actual weight of it, but also the ethical weight, the seriousness of a gun, in a hand, in the world.

Mitchum also talks about calibrating his performance in direct relationship to the context of his performance. For instance, he says that in movie acting, the place is real and the people are fake and in theatre acting the people are real and the place is fake and that no one should ever get too hung up on the words, they are secondary to time and space. He says that if you actually manage *your* experience in the context of *the* experience, everything else falls into place. Dave Hickey describes Mitchum’s method as: “Touch the world, set the pace, fuck the text” (Hickey 2017, 143).

It’s as good a description as any that I have found of DANCERNESS. There is a significant set of information that comes from a dance education, be it autodidactic, institutionalised, via an amateur or a professional experience. However it happens, it is apparent that because of the specialised noticing and complex managing of sensation, space and time, dancers have the ability to comprehend information at the very point at which our experience of ourselves ends and our experience of the rest of the world begins. And vice versa. I think that dancers give us access to this specialised noticing. I suppose, in part, I’m talking about empathy.

Last Tuesday, I came to see *Framed Movements* here at ACCA. Maria Hassabi’s work *Intermission* was up and running. While I was here, I sat down and wrote this note to the performers—Maria, Paige and Hristoula—all three of whom used to come to my classes when they were young dancers newly arrived in New York City. They were about the same age as the young women reading for you this evening. I wrote:

Hey Maria, Paige, Hristoula, I came in here after looking at all those fucking videos in the other rooms and there you three really and actually were on your majestic staircase—a triple threat, double denim, shiny shoed, slow motion glamour event asking time and attention from yourselves and from us. Asking a lot actually, in a good way. An older lady and her husband came in. They had many grey plastic shopping bags and she had a bit of old egg on her jumper. I particularly noticed that because I also had traces of morning egg on my skirt. Depressing. The man briefly looked up at you, grumbled and wandered away. The lady stayed and watched with a slightly sour expression but that might be how her face settles these days. It happens. ‘What is this?’ she asked me, I said ‘Well I think it’s a dance’. She said ‘It’s too slow for a dance’, so I said ‘Does a dance have to be a particular speed?’ She was quiet for a little bit and then she said ‘No’. She, no, we, kept watching for a while and then she said ‘It’s beautiful’ and then after a while ‘It looks like it might hurt’. And then, ‘they look like they could do with a cuddle’. I am not making this up. So there you go, your work gave her the opportunity to move, in about ten minutes, from suspicion, to curiosity, to appreciation, to admiration, to empathy. Videos do not ask that kind of time or that kind of attention from me.

To my mind, the artists who are making the resonating and affecting work in this choreographic (re)turn the visual art world is having, are people who have DANCERNESS in them. Maria Hassabi, Tino Seghal, Xavier Leroy, Boris Chamatz, La Ribot, Ralph Lemon et al, follow in the fine tradition of Yvonne Rainer, Simone Forti, Steve Paxton, Trisha Brown (there is an enormous amount of DANCERNESS right there). The work of each of these artists, contains a specifically framed opportunity for heightened noticing. And we notice our noticing inside the experience of the work. Via the specificity of the people dancing the work, we experience the qualities of attentiveness, awareness, articulation, control, specificity and embodiment. Their noticing encourages and expands our noticing, of them, of ourselves, of the world around us.

I suppose you could say that DANCERNESS is an “empathy factory,” a term I first came across in a Rebecca Solnit essay about a Leper Colony (Solnit 2013, 57). An empathy factory that produces something from nothing and leaves no material trace, no object, nothing that will ever end up in a landfill. DANCERNESS only gives to the world, it takes nothing away. It is totally sustainable. In fact, most people don’t even know it’s there.

Notes

1. This article was first published on the ACCA blog and is reproduced with permission here: <http://specificinbetweenacca.tumblr.com/post/108407089119/specific-in-between-commissioned-lecture>. The lecture was part of the exhibition *Framed Movements*, October 10–November 23, 2014 <https://acca.melbourne/exhibition/framed-movements/>, in the context of Helen Grogan’s

Specific In-Between (The choreographic negotiated in six parts)

<https://acca.melbourne/program/helen-grogan-specific-in-between-the-choreographic-negotiated-in-six-parts/>.

Works Cited

- Berger, John. 2011. "Seeing Through Lies." *Harper's Magazine* 322 (1931): 45–50.
<https://harpers.org/archive/2011/04/seeing-through-lies/>
- Farber, Manny. 1998. "White Elephant Versus Termite Art." In *Negative Space: Manny Farber on the Movies*, 134–144. New York: Da Capo Press. Originally published 1962; also available online: <http://www.coldbacon.com/writing/mannyfarber-termiteart.html>
- Hickey, Dave. 2017. "Mitchum Gets Out of Jail." In *Perfect Wave: More Essays on Art and Democracy*, 135–143. Chicago, IL: University of Chicago Press.
- Solnit, Rebecca. 2013. "The Separating Sickness: How Leprosy Teaches Empathy." *Harper's Magazine* 326 (1957): 50–57. <https://harpers.org/archive/2013/06/the-separating-sickness/>

REBECCA HILTON (1964-) is an Australian artist based in Stockholm. Her practice incorporates dancing, performing, choreographing, teaching, conversing and writing. Over three and a half decades she has contributed to the work of an array of artists including Russell Dumas, Stephen Petronio, Mathew Barney, Michael Clark, Tere O'Connor, Jennifer Monson, John Jasperse, Lucy Guerin, Tino Sehgal, Xavier Le Roy, Scarlet Yu, Chrysa Parkinson, among others. Rebecca uses embodied practices and choreographic systems to explore concepts and manifestations of GROUPNESS. Her research environments include, but are not limited to, dance companies, universities, arts festivals, community based organisations, friendship circles and family groups. Rebecca is a Professor (Choreography) in the research area SITE EVENT ENCOUNTER at the Stockholm University of the Arts.

© 2017 Rebecca Hilton



Except where otherwise noted, this work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial-ShareAlike 4.0 International License (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>).