

Book Review

Bodies of Thought: Twelve Australian Choreographers
Ed. by Erin Brannigan and Virginia Baxter (Adelaide:
Wakefield Press, 2014)

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In *Bodies of Thought*, editors Erin Brannigan and Virginia Baxter have brought together a rich collection of critical writing articulating the wealth and depth of Australian choreographic thinking occurring over many decades of practice. The choreographers included have an indisputable legacy in generating influential sensibilities, logics, studio methods, aesthetics and forms of collaboration across many disciplines. These choreographers are paired with dance writers, philosophers and scholars who clarify the critical terrain activated within the practice of each artist—distilling the critical, philosophical, technological and aesthetic thinking occurring through the studio practice of choreography. Each choreographer's work is elaborated through a short critical essay and an interview, with high quality photographs distilling a visual translation of each choreographer's work. Additionally, the authors and publishers have worked together with *RealTime* arts magazine to create an online archive that accompanies the book (<http://www.realtimedance.net/realtimearts.net/realtimedance>). The resource provides an invaluable companion to the book by allowing readers to access photographs and excerpts of the many of the works discussed as well as reviews.

Brannigan and Baxter's editorial work in differentiating key themes leads to a sense of multivocality, crystallising different ways of approaching, understanding, and discussing particular studio practices. In the introduction to the book, Brannigan describes its focus as 'revealing the compositional practices, technical systems, aesthetic preoccupations and cultural preoccupations that shape specific choreographic works' (1). The following chapters are organised through four sections.

The first section, 'Between Dance Practice and Choreography', features choreographers Russell Dumas, Rosalind Crisp and Ros Warby, with writing by Sally Gardner, Isabelle Ginot and Elizabeth Dempster. This part of the book explores how choreographic structure is formulated through processual focus: thinking, imagining and questioning, as Dempster puts it:

Above and beyond texts, scripts, choreographic frameworks, gestures, steps and movement, what the performer does is pay attention and shifts

ours. A proficient performer (and the one we identify as ‘having presence’) is one who understands and has mastered this perceptual play. (32)

Choreographic thinking as defined in this section is deeply processual, ongoing as a form of research, iterative and somatically considered regardless of audience. Rosalind Crisp, in conversation with Edwige Phitoussi puts it this way; ‘I am much more concerned ... with how to enter by the door of perception rather than action ... perception is nourished by attentive action. Ultimately, for me the movements themselves are less interesting than the attention of the dancer ... where she is in her body in each and every moment’ (25).

The second section of the book, ‘Dance and the World: The Duality of Craft and Content’, reflects on choreography by Lucy Guerin, Gideon Obarzanek and Garry Stewart, with essays by Philipa Rothfield, Bryoni Trezise and Anne Thompson. Here, choreographic thinking is defined by specific productions, their particular thematic concerns, and the movement vocabularies arising therein. Rothfield defines Guerin’s dancing in terms of it’s the position it occupies between dance theatre and non-narrative dramaturgy. Her mode of critical reflection is grounded in theatrical spectator-studies. She describes Guerin’s work as allowing, ‘for surreal displacements of subject matter, kinaesthetic play, as well as phrase materials that do not directly reflect their theme’ (50), and provides a carefully written close analysis of Guerin’s *Human Interest Story* considered through the lenses of ethics and politics. Trezise discusses Obarzanek’s choreography (with Chunky Move) for *Glow* in terms of “human-technological interaction” via its relationship with light and how it “operated as a mover within the work—an autonomous performer interacting with, and co-generating, the multiple sensory and visual fields the work as a whole established’ (64). Anne Thompson’s essay on Garry Stewart emphasizes its spectacular scenographic, technological, queer, glamorous and technical dance language in relationship with post structuralist thinking.

The third section, ‘Dance Theatre: Expanding the Form’, reflects on narrative, dramaturgical and cultural approaches. It introduces key works by Meryl Tankard, Kate Champion and Stephen Page, with accompanying writing by Shirley McKechnie, Jordan Beth Vincent, Rosemary Klich, Keith Gallasch, and Rachel Fensham. Each of these choreographers has a clear and specific approach to developing dance theatre from specific points of view. Tankard, for example, takes her influence from working closely with Pina Bausch in new directions. Champion works with non-narrative, interdisciplinary approaches to dance theatre, which stimulates discussion of her rigorous collaborative processes with multi-media, scenography, light and processes of improvisation. Rachel Fensham’s writing about and with aboriginal artist Stephen Page provides an essential component to the book. This is the only chapter drawing on Aboriginal ontologies, dramatic form and cultural practices, with connection to the intensity of landscape and trauma held in ‘Belonging to Country’ in contemporary times.

The final section of *Bodies of Thought*, ‘Dancing at the Intersections of Time, Space and Language’, examines the choreography of Helen Herbertson, Tess de Quincey and Sue Healey, with writing by Erin Brannigan, Amanda Card and Julie-Anne Long. These artists

are described in Brannigan's introduction to the section as playing 'adventurously with space and perception in intense works of modest scale but with large ramifications' (134). Brannigan discusses Herbertson's *Morphia Series* in terms of 'the ephemera that surrounds the work' (138), examining writing as a compositional, choreographic practice and in terms of the poetics of the work. Here, choreography is considered in terms of specific textures, as Herbertson describes it, 'an "open grid" in which the spectator "lands"' (139). Amanda Card's discussion of Tess De Quincey emphasises choreography as 'a space between species and worlds (150), and details de Quincey's work *Nerve 9* in terms of its collaboration with philosophy, poetry and Bodyweather practice. The final section of *Bodies of Thought* discusses Sue Healey's *Fine Line Terrain*, articulating the dancer as geographer, drawing on movement researcher Hubert Godard. Dancers are discussed as scribing, eating and carving space, which is considered from multiple scales—the global, the bodily, the atomic.

An interesting common thread that arises through much of the book is the positioning of Australian choreographers—both by their own reckoning and by that of others—as finding their roots in modern and postmodern dance genealogies traced through Europe (and the work of Pina Bausch in particular), the US (and specific modern and post-modern dance lineages), the UK (also dance theatre) and Japan (Bodyweather). As such, there is a certain 'apprenticeship-with-greatness' narrative that runs through many of the biographical accounts and analysis of the choreographer. Despite this, the scope of the book provokes a strong sense of specifically Australian practices and sensibilities, showing that choreographic thinking might be born of Australian influences and landscapes both imaginative and physical as much as those from elsewhere. The collective critical labour of the editors and contributors goes some way towards undertaking this work by charting the aesthetic and critical rigour of Australian choreographers in relation to places, cultures and identities found in relation to *this* particular socio-geographic-cultural-political context, and the possibilities and challenges emerging with it.

I imagine this book will become a vital textbook for dance and performance students, and practice-led researchers throughout Australia and internationally. Alongside its resources on the *RealTime* website this material makes a timely contribution (given the international growth and development of practice-led research) to dance history and theory, choreographic research and interdisciplinary research. In pairing such a wide range of landmark artists with equally rigorous critical practitioners, *Bodies of Thought: Twelve Australian Choreographers* opens out exemplary models for understanding dance as a critical and philosophical endeavour.

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