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SITE FORUM: The Environment - The Site

Performance Space, December 2002

Looking back to 1988 when my individual practice started to emerge, I now realise that I have been gradually weaving a field of research which pendulates between the city and the desert. It has comprised both long and short as well as very fast and very slow processes and embraces most notably, for the context of this forum, the following performances:-

LAKE MUNGO (1991-1995): *Notes 2, Mary's Country, Stalker - Country, Square of Infinity, Is / Is.2 COMPRESSION 100 - SYDNEY*¹ (1996)

*DURATIONAL TRILOGY** - *Epilogue to Compression* (12hrs - 1996); *Segments from an Inferno* (6hrs - 1997); *24hrs* (1998 & 1999)

INHABITATION NOS 1 & 2 (1998 & 1999)

CITY TO CITY (8hrs - 2000)

TRIPLE ALICE 1, 2 & 3 (1999 - 2001) *interdisciplinary laboratories and accompanying performances*

Two performances *NO COLD FEET* and *FORM OF SCENT*, despite their relevance to this forum in being site-specific works, are not included as they do not relate to the thematics presented here.

I also now realise that a main focus of my work has been 'inhabitation' and the 'nature of place', often utilising a durational scale and methodology to engender experience and relation. Places enter and inhabit people and determine their language and being. Aspects of that place continue on in that person. And who then is the host? Where does the place exist? And within this physical and conceptual interpermeation what is location and dislocation? and what is place and relationship? What is being in place? What is a place of being? Is there presence because of absence?

Returning home one night on a suburban train in Tokyo, sprawled on one of the bench seats opposite me was a drunk 'salary man' asleep. His body was pulsing involuntarily, the limbs and torso tracing delicately detailed tracts of experience that were clearly being lived in his dream state by different parts of his body. It was akin to movement that I have observed in a newborn child - where the environment of the womb continues to exert its influence after birth. I remember thinking that this was a perfect example of the *butoh* which Kazuo Ohno speaks so much of - the unformed, the foetus - the dance of the heart.

Within ***COMPRESSION 100 - SYDNEY*** we asked - ***Can a city be danced?*** and ***To what extent do artists form the shape, sound and feeling of a city?*** Positing artists as poles of definition, as conductors and transmitters, what patternings then emerge within the mesh of the city space and spectrum? And coming from different ages, backgrounds, races, languages - how then do we meet or manifest definition - in a performative meeting? Where are the cross-points that spark? The aim was to find a simple way to let something happen - a series of low-tech but energetic meetings where emphasis was placed on the act of performance itself (be it on the internet, on the radio or on a live-audience to performer basis).

We were looking to gauge the physical and metaphysical character of this particular city as an environment. Can the city's *geist* and consciousness be tapped - be performed? Could we be danced by the city?

Compression was 164 individually conceived performances over the 31 days of May 1996 at inside and outside sites and venues all over the metropolitan area - from the dense high-rise of the CBD (Central Business District) through ethnically defined suburbs to the Blue Mountains in the west and the reaches of the northern and southern coastline. The sites ranged from kindergartens to jails, public fountains to bamboo forests, places of worship to trains and bridges, bathing sheds to art galleries, animal pounds to casinos and theatres, hospitals to the Opera House etc etc. Amidst this wide scope there are, for now, two points I'd like to emphasise - the contract and the flow. What became very visible was the inherent contract each site and situation presented - in terms of geography, the textures, the speed, the architecture and its intent, the history - known and unknown alongside the inhabitants of that space and their expectations. And sometimes the contract appeared sacred, exalted, sometimes profane, mundane. The majority of works had a clearly planned strategy. Only a few were approached on the basis of a pure improvisation. Several

¹ * Performances by De Quincey / Lynch, a partnership with sculptor/dancer Stuart Lynch 1992-1999

were approached on the basis of instructions sent by post or presented during the performance itself and on a couple of occasions we only met the collaborator for the first time *after* the event - these circumstances were all the choice of the collaborators. However amidst all these models, the question was always how to arrive at an acute realisation of the place and of the moment? In other words, could we meet the underlying contract, the equation of the place at that instant in time? And when we embarked on the first day, we plunged, we became immersed and taken up by the flow of an all-encompassing river - the shape of which we had to some degree attempted to anticipate in planning the sequence of the performances. But we were now borne along. The process of responding under such circumstances takes on the nature of swimming and one is formed by the river, its banks and bed and by the movement of the water. We were flowed. The presentation of various aspects of compression - the nature of pressure itself - was perceived as an integral part of the concept on every level. The intense pressure of the 'grid' of performance works was designed to optimise an immediate and collaborative performance state, allowing for a responsive rather than a preconceived language to occur; and to find a 'hyper-performance state' or a 'hyperflow'. Rather than the presentation of a hyperactivity, our suggestion was that the flow of the material initiated by pressure would induce a tumultuous charge of necessity; that this flow would find its own, specific form, process and parameters and bring together elements that would not otherwise arise in more considered conditions. The River of Compression took on its own impetus and a 'rolling' that allowed situations and ideas to emerge, take shape and be realised where they might otherwise not occur or just remain on the drawing board of the mind. The flow itself created energy and generated encounters, allowing the materialisation of ideas through the constant availability and mobility of resources. Something was suddenly allowable and things could happen very easily - and they did! Situations evolved, ideas were embraced, new people joined and tried things out purely because they were within reach of the general flow of events. And the extent of the flow appeared far-reaching - many mentioned how, when they could not get to an event, it would be extremely present for them, inducing a wondering - what was happening, what was being mapped at that moment, at that point - elsewhere?

But ultimately, is this river the flow of collective instinct?

The capacity of the surfer to skim and ride gently on the surface is underpinned by a deep understanding and knowledge of the underlying principles of the generic phenomena and the specific environment as well as extensive lived experience in the tumble of immersion.

My practice is based in Body Weather (founded by Min Tanaka & Mai-Juku Performance Co, Japan). Body Weather seeks to maintain an ongoing exploration, an open investigation of the body. It proposes the body as an environment reflecting a greater environment and aims to generate a conscious relation to the constant state of change - inside and outside. In developing sensitivity and cultivating awareness, the intelligence of the body is exposed - *a thinking body*².

The body as a carrier of relationship

manipulated body
bearer of genetics and history
host/hosted

imperatives of enclosure
frameworks and *threshold of perception* itself. ³

Military parachuters plummeted from a height of kilometres into virtually unknown terrain are taught to sit still for 10 minutes before making any action - to listen, to absorb. I've always been struck by the similarities between religious, military and performance practices. '...It is only pain'... to hold, to embrace and to know death? Experience and skill slide into the subconscious informing and infusing the intuitive. The wind, the fluctuations and the cycles. The life and the death of the elements that constitute place.

Min used to direct us constantly to give up, surrender; losing muscle, losing; withering; fall down; towards a transparency? The skin is not the borderline, it is just one borderline. The blurring.

the animal - instinctive, permeable

² Tanaka, Min. In conversation with author (1984-1991)

³ Phelan, Penny. 2003 'Beckett and the Visual Arts': plenary session at [Samuel Beckett Symposium](#) (Jan 6-9), Sydney.

in place - a positioning
porosity
a meeting point between inside and outside
convergence in the moment
exchange, dialogue
negotiating the moment
constant formation in the space in between
*the minimal unit is two*⁴
a dance of relationship

*Drive-On*⁵

multiplicity
nature of sensation
nature of place
nature of time
nature of relation - the unseen, the felt

manipulated body
danced by the place

in attempting to meet this discussion, I find myself describing process

preparation, discipline
in order to escape habit
in order to map necessity
in order to question
in order to remain open

*freeing the mind*⁶
freeing the body

The durational performances arose out of a necessity of their own, strongly inspired by the Noh tradition as well as performance art practices - allowing an invitation to an inhabitation, investigating a relation to 'dwell' both for the performer and the audience alike whilst also accentuating and rendering the process of being and of action highly visible and accessible. This has ranged from a process of digestion relative to *Compression* on the basis of random choice structures to the specifics of the site of The Hyde Park Barracks relative to Dante's *Inferno*; as a place of detainment and housing of imported labour, a place where a massive and everchanging body of persons awaited placement in an 'elsewhere', a location in the unknown according to a judgment. The durational aspect of *Compression* involved not only the embrace of the entirety of the month but also the final, culminative day which was an 8-hour pilgrimage down the Parramatta Road - a heavily trafficated oft described as toxic road - from Parramatta (the first city and colonial centre relative to Port Jackson) to Sydney, Observatory Hill. The invitation to repeat this performance in 2000 as *City to City* was proposed as a meditation on a Passage of Time, a Passage of Space and, inspired by aspects of Gestalt Psychology, on where the awareness is dwelling. The performers were asked to monitor changes of focus and shifts in state - where is your awareness now? - and to constantly vocalise what they were noticing, which was recorded on microcassette. And in response to Jane Goodall's question "and what of the road from Parramatta to the Centre?" we utilised the same duration and the same method in the Central Desert in *Triple Alice 2*. We started before dawn in the moonlight four circlings of 2 hours in four directions, allowing us a regular return to the homestead for much needed water. This meandering of muttering and murmuring progressed to a hallucinatory stagger of exhaustion touching the ecstatic as we returned at midday, in tandem with an amused swarm of non-muttering artists who acted both as audience and as performers. Is this performance?

weather of the place
weather of the body
weather of the mind
integral to the place

⁴ Tanaka, Min. In conversation with author (1984-1991)

⁵ "Drive On" is the name of the newsletter published by Tanaka and the Body Weather Laboratory, Tokyo.

⁶ "Freeing the Mind" is the name of a video performance piece by Marina Abramovic.

as energetic systems

Drive On

the moving of the weather
catching the atmospherics
the meeting of energetics

magnetism
*the attractors*⁷
mapping of energetics
engendering of resonances
individual body / group body
independence / coexistence
what erupts
what emerges
what presents itself as a necessity
in the meeting in between
constant vigilance
constant negotiation

*wild being*⁸
fragile equilibrium

BODYWEATHER RESEARCH IN THE OUTBACK OF AUSTRALIA 1991-92 was the beginning of a 5-year relationship to Lake Mungo and approaching the specifics of this continent. Parallel to the mapping of sensation involving distinctions relative to scale, speed, texture, weight, pressure, density whilst posing the body as a site and as a reflector of site, we were also taken up by the presence of the invisible. The strong sense of the lake body - which dried out 30,000 years ago - the immense geological/historical perspectives, amidst the bones, the erosions and the scrub. Within the Body Weather process, the attunement of senses and awareness, we were beginning to look strongly to an instinctive response and how to train this - to arrive at a subconscious relation and a deeper meeting which bypasses thought. Bare bodies, unadorned, questioned by the transparencies and the urgencies. And the question of how to filter the information of the sacred sites, the massive import and consequence of the world's first ritual cremation sites that have a specific and deep spiritual significance for Aboriginal people. We camped twice outside the bounds of the National Park with two different aboriginal groups who claim heritage with the Lake and in each case the dancers were asked to go out into the country for some hours and to return to dance the impressions their bodies had registered. Wonderfully enough the response we received was "*you's waking up the land*" and there clearly appeared to be no impediment in understanding what we were doing, which we so often met from 'whities'. On the way back to Mungo, I remember looking in disbelief as I encountered the 'line' of the kerb and the road. It was suddenly utterly incomprehensible. It cut as an impossibility through the dots of meandering.

From the outset I was drawn towards the centre. And my first visit occurred in 1995 when *is.2*, a solo piece which had grown out of Lake Mungo, was presented in Alice Springs - in the springs themselves, at the Telegraph Station - the electric link through the extremities of the continent. From this has grown a series of collaborations with local artists and the formation of the **Triple Alice Labs** which were "*centred within a set of convergencies and overlaps between disciplines, artforms, individual and languages... an experimental event which would act as a 'think tank', a database and a rich and ongoing informatic process. What is an aesthetics, or more accurately a poetics, which responds to locale in Australia? What's a useful and productive notion of exchange and collaboration in the context of information technologies?... a category of the ontologically unspoken... a first attempt at tracing an interactive history of the senses.. a living 'topo-analysis'*".⁹ At the end of *Triple Alice 1* as a summation for the Body Weather workshop, a performance **Weather-1** was made in the river bed. The choreography generated a 40 minute unpredictable structure, a kind of 'seething' for the workshop participants. In observing it I felt we had touched the weather of the place. This was followed by another group performance **Walk-2** done almost

⁷ Goodall, Jane. 1996. *Strange Attractors: shared perversity*, re "Compression 100 - Sydney: May 1996" in *Real Time 14* Aug-Sep 1996 -

⁸ A phrase coined by Merleau Ponty: from email discussions with Stuart Grant as part of the, Place and Performance seminar, University of Sydney April 2002?

⁹ Harrison, Martin. *Edge, desert, reticulation, information*, re *Triple Alice 1*, *RealTime 35*, Feb-March 2000

immediately after arrival in Sydney, within a sand installation entitled *Passage* by Northern Territory artist Kim Mahood who had participated in the lab. Again, utilising random choice within an open structure, this then appeared more closely akin to a meditation touching the scale, the weight and the atmospherics of the place as it still existed within the performers awareness and bodies. Both performances were completely dependent on the imprint of being in the place.

the body as geology
bone and nerve body
granular geomorphic body
seismic body
ash body

riverbed

weight
obscurity
fold and unfold
ambiguous body
reed body
hollow
wind body
viscosity
tumbling turbulences
volatile body

lucid water body

How to stand upright in Australia?
the precariousness
the trembling precipice of Ohno's baby's first steps

white quartz shattered
conductivity - binary shuttle, data flow
an electric field, a charged space
the switches
Hijikata's images: watch/watched; hold/held
inversions
violate/violated
the hosting of the shell

*the land's ghostbreath*¹⁰

unfolded folds
dead breath
sparse
beyond the limit, where there is no sustenance

Innumerable performances have already grown out of the three *Triple Alice Labs* to date and currently we are working on ***Digital Country***, a 72-hour performance in the riverbed in Alice Springs planned for '04 which brings into focus the ongoing concerns of the *Triple Alice Labs*. Besides an extensive range of audio/visual content, the performative substance, which is still under development, in the main resides in a repetitive circuit of 76 short performances called P4's (a strategy developed by Peter Snow towards multiartform individual and collaborative performance) which were made by and constituted part of the process of a wide variety of artists during the labs. Also a Dictionary of Atmospheres which are very directly concerned with the invitation from the place and it's distinctions: the underlying watercourses; the highly charged, destabilising flux; the violence and the elemental. In uncovering paradoxes and the collisions between the globalised and the specific local environment which scream out of the burning point that is the Centre, the contributions from philosophers and scientists, particularly through the input of Stuart Grant, have uncovered the relevance of

¹⁰ Grant, Stuart. *"In the Dirt - a pathetic remnant. A Casebook of Triple Alice 3, Hamilton Downs Youth Camp 2001"*; unpublished, Dpt Performance Studies, USyd

Eight theses:- 1. Signs, not molecules, are the basic units in the study of life. 2. The simplest entity to possess real semiotic competence is the cell. This is because the cell is a self-referential system based on redescription in the digital code of DNA.¹¹ 3. Subjectivity - or better "subjectness" - is not an either-or but a more-or-less phenomenon. Subjectness has its own natural history. 4. Living systems exhibit extreme semiogenic behaviour based on the semiotic dynamics of semiotic interactions, whereby habits come to signify the release of further habits in an infinitely long and complex web stretching back to the beginning of life and forward to the global semiosphere of tomorrow. 5. Vertebrate bodies are supposed to function on the basis of swarm dynamic principles not unlike those pertaining to social insects. 6. The swarm of cells constituting a human body should be seen as a swarm of swarms, i.e., a huge swarm of overlapping swarms of very different kinds. The minor swarms again are swarm-entities, so that we get a hierarchy of swarms. 7. An image arises in which the brain is functionally integrated into the body. Swarms of immune cells interact with swarms of nerve cells in maintaining the somatic ecology. 8. Thoughts and feelings are not localised entities. They swarm out of our body collective.

... on the land, wherever there forms a smooth space that gnaws, that tends to grow, in all directions... an extraordinarily fine topology that relies not on points or objects but rather on haecceities, on sets of relations (winds, undulations of snow or sand, the song of the sand or the creaking of ice, the tactile qualities of both)¹².

Where has the body of the Fable gone? The body of metamorphosis, the one of a pure chain of appearances, of a timeless and sexless fluidity of forms, the ceremonial body brought to life by mythology, or the Peking Opera and Oriental theatre, as well as by dance: a non individual body, a dual and fluid body - body without desire, yet capable of all metamorphoses - a body freed from the mirror of itself, yet given over to all seduction? And what seduction is more violent than the one of changing species, to transfigure oneself into the animal, the vegetable, the mineral or even the inanimate? This movement makes us traitors to our own species, and exposes us to the giddiness of all their species. This is the model of amorous seduction, which also pursues the strangeness of the other sex, and the possibility of being initiated into it as into a different animal or vegetable species... Not a psychological body, not a sexual body, a body freed from all subjectivity, a body recovering the animal felinity of the pure object, of pure movement, of a pure gestural transpiration.¹³

Can we perform atmospherics? Within the ever unfolding dynamic thresholds and the continual collapse of structures, the embrace of enormity, the emptiness and vast expanses, the pointers of detention and genocide, the indications of limitless consciousness - lie the uncertain breath of the continent.

¹¹ A concept developed by the Danish biologist Jesper Hoffmeyer
www.molbio.ku.dk/molbiopages/abk/personalpages/Jesper/Swarm.html

¹² Deleuze, Gilles and Guattari, Félix. p 382 *A Thousand Plateaus*, University of Minnesota Press 1987.

¹³ Baudrillard, Jean. "Metamorphosis, Metaphor, Metastasis" in *The Ecstasy of Communication*. Edited by Sylvère Lotringer. Semiotext(e) Foreign Agent Series. New York: Semiotext(e), 45-56 1988.