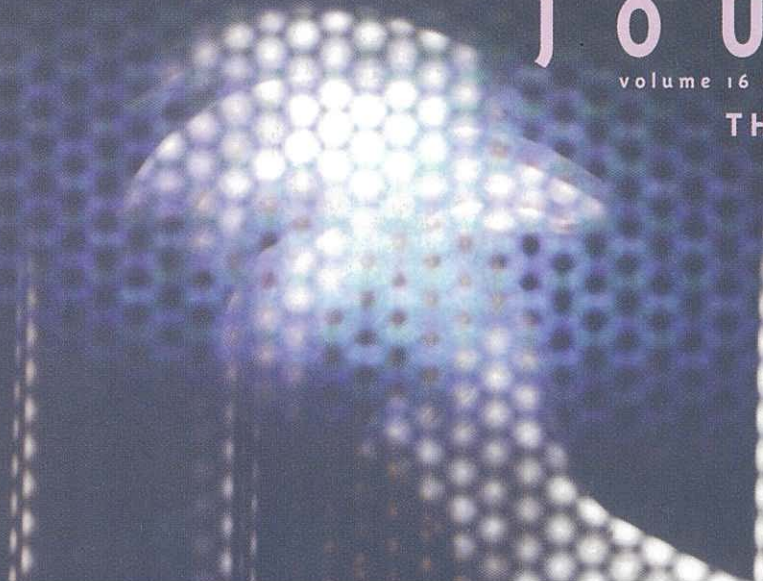


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THE VOICE OF DANCE



Tall stories

Carol Brown reflects on dance, language, writing and theory.

'Philosophy is to thinking as dance is to moving.'
Marilyn Frye.¹

Words form a skin on thoughts. The accretions of language accumulate on the body forming patterns of speech, some of which are easier to decipher than others for styles of speech are modified by their contexts. Being an independent dance artist in the current moment means being fluent in a variety of languages: the language of bureaucracy, of application writing and form filling, the language of explanation of speaking to and for your work, and the language of media, of writing good copy, of the interview and the sound byte. We are full of languages.

Within this literate environment artists recognise that objects with words attached are more valued than those without words, and that the power of speech confers status, privilege and visibility. Words, filling up pages, are anterior and posterior to movement, they legitimise the activity of dancing. We must speak or we will be spoken for.

If we allow others to speak on our behalf, because we are deprived of speech or we have undervalued its power in privileging our own movements over all else, then we must also be prepared for it to sound foreign and inappropriate, maybe even obscure and idiosyncratic. I might resolve this discomfit by reminding myself that I became a dancer so I wouldn't have to speak, and retreat into some pre-linguistic realm of pure physical presence. For being a dancer presupposes a preferred mode of communication within the non-verbal realm of sensations, articulations and expressions experienced through the body. We hold hands with speech writers, paper and pen pushers, pushing papers across smaller and smaller spaces, but there are low expectations about our own abilities as writers, thinkers and intellectual divas. The assumption is that we are struck dumb by the complexities of language and theory.

The body of the text

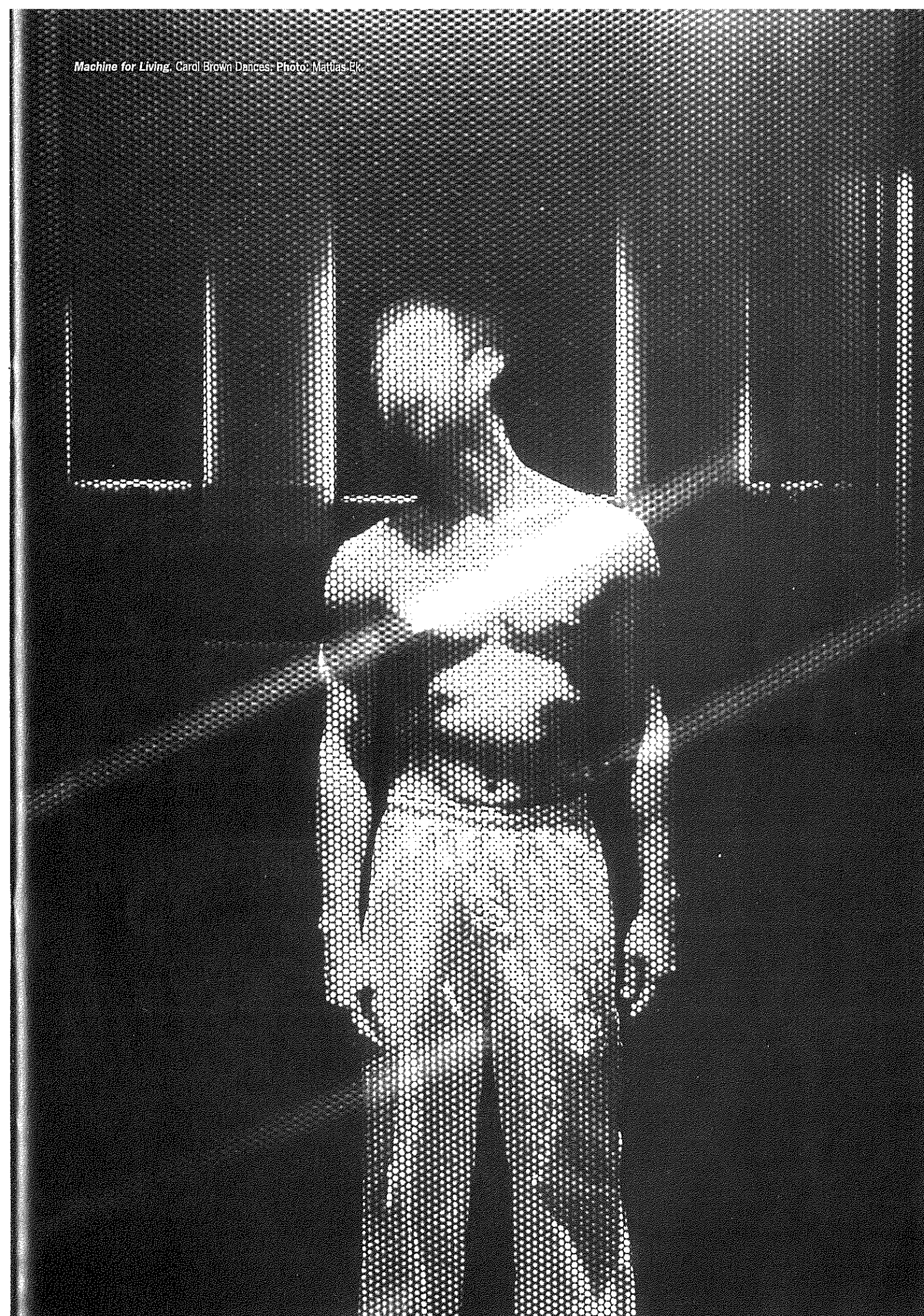
I imagine a dance in which piles of paper, white A4 sheets with typed text on every page, are moved by dancers through a series of choreographed spatial patterns. They are stacked and twisted, interpenetrated, folded and creased, dog-eared and stained and moved from one pile to another, are shuffled and sorted and filed in cardboard boxes and slipped into see-through envelopes. In this dance of texts the stacks of paper are constantly rearranged and added to, getting higher and higher, obscuring the bodies of the dancers and gradually filling up their space, until they are held in place by the weight of all these words, still moving, but without going anywhere. They are, to use an expression of Paul Virilio, 'racing standing still'.

This will be my 'paper' and it will be called, *'body as text'*. Its aping of other texts and writings about dance, as a form of 'ambulatory scholarship' (Susan Foster) and as 'body writing', (Ann Cooper Albright) will ensure maximum exposure within the circuit of the academic community.² Its postmodern parodic play, as an ironical intervention in the discourse of dance scholarship, will be recognised by the international community of dance scholars as radical and interventionary. It will be 'read' by scholars and students, published as performance, talked about at dance conferences, and more papers will be produced and written out of it; there may even be an article in a book or an academically refereed journal. But will it stand up? That is, will my performance of *'body as text'* stand up to the acid test of theatre, to what Robert LePage terms, the pragmatics of performance, 'does it work'; in other words, what does it add up to? ³

The literary machine

The feeling I get in reading much dance theory is one of circularity, it is of an endless cycle of peregrinations, a very pure process that fulfills itself and that never ceases to reach fulfilment as it proceeds. As a self-sufficient experiment in writing, it is either

Machine for Living, Carol Brown Dances, Photo: Matthias Ek.



a scholarly exercise in search of what is signified or a highly textural exercise in search of a signifier. It is part of the literary machine, but it has as its subject that most slippery of materials, the body in motion. Writing about dancing can seem like travelling without reason.

I no longer feel particularly fed by dance writing, preferring as I do the intuitive grazing of text-sampling over the rigours of detailed literary referencing and systematic researching. In the early 1990s, I worked in an academic dance department, firstly as a doctoral research student in choreography and theory, and subsequently as a dance lecturer. Within this environment I was involved in what Gayatri Spivak aptly describes as 'the scramble for legitimisation in the house of theory'.⁴ The theory which I was drawn to explore, to make a house for my practice as a choreographer, was not dance specific but critical theory, contemporary feminist philosophy, and psychoanalytic thought. Enthralled by the discourses of poststructuralism, feminism, deconstruction and postmodernism, I 'became' them, speaking in tongues, writing and dancing, a self-parodying speech of psychobabble and echolalia. I called this process 'choreography theory'.⁵

Theory is seductive. It challenges your thinking, it stimulates new ideas, it can radically alter your practice. In my experience it forced me to address the habits of motion and mind which had been accrued through experience. Seeing, as Janet Wolff explains, 'what theory can do to us in terms of practice', meant a radical reworking of styles, approaches and working methods.⁶ It meant literally finding my voice as a performer. Now, in the present context, working outside of an academic environment, I draw upon it to kick start a process. It is part of my toolbox, something to be read, referred to, discussed with the dancers in the studio, hashed over, pondered, and a crutch for when I run dry. In most of my work, I am in dialogue with theory. Most recently I worked with the ideas and writings of the architect of modernism, Le Corbusier, in creating *Machine for Living*.⁷ His language of architecture informed and illuminated a process which included the anatomising of space through choreography, design and digital animation. This work sought to embody ideas about what it means to be linear or pliable, to inhabit spaces punctured by perforated metallic forms and to learn to move through and within a digital mediascape.

While working through certain problematics of space within the studio and with the dancers, ideas are questioned, taken hold of, moved through and experimented with. This relationship, between theory and practice, cannot however be forced. I have learnt that if you are thinking of an idea, or of a message you want to convey, the mind becomes very busy and preoccupied with this idea and it can inhibit the development of the dance. Attempts to 'represent a theoretical concept' invariably fail because they do not account for the differences between the linguistic and the corporeal. Choreography is a process of materialising ideas but it is not reducible to the symbolic limits of the writer's linguistic turns. Though dancing bodies are produced and regulated there is always, hovering in the recesses of the symbolic ordering of the body, the risk that they will break the code, rupture the aesthetic and trip up perception, dislocating the completeness of the dance's framing, of its being titled a dance at all.

Accessibility versus elitism

Complex ideas undergo a process of dumbing down within a wider dance culture which privileges access over intellectual content. Through what Bryan Smith describes as the 'language of submission', of grant writing and proposal making, the dance artist must submit to the language of bureaucracy, this is a language of extreme simplification, resistant to the contours of thought and artistic processes.⁸ An overarching emphasis upon accessibility, simple language and the descriptive over the metaphorical disempowers the dancer, and is part of her infantilisation within structures of control which can appear to be authoritarian and parenting. Despite much evidence that no evening in the theatre is ever wasted which aims as much to enlighten as to entertain, the structures of support for dance continue to avoid setting their sights too high in terms of its intellectual content.⁹

Choreographers need their work to be disseminated through different forums of writing and they value dance writers who are informed, engaging and intellectually provocative. 'Difficult' dance, or dance which crosses into new territories of knowledge and performance can be critically supported by theoretically informed writing. Within the dance community however, there is a general lack of understanding of the university context and how it can work with and for the profession. Mystified by

its technical languages and analytic structures, there seems to be a reluctance by many in the profession to recognise the academy as a privileged space for the exploration of ideas and inter-disciplinary projects and to appreciate just how creative such intellectual enquiry can be.

This is not without justification. The bureaucratisation of university dance departments, their accountability through the Research Assessment Exercise, has created a 'publish or perish' pressure on departments to write for scholarly publications over more readily accessible and readable media. In this context, more journalistic writing, writing which might form a bridge between the critical endeavours of the academy and the creative processes in the dance studio, becomes marginalised and devalued. Theory is in this sense viewed as parasitic or deforming of practice, because it is seen as using dance to illustrate ideas rather than to be part of an interdiscursive practice, stimulating debate, enquiry and research. In this climate, theoretical dance writing has little, if any, impact upon the professional dance sector, for the possibility of our speaking with each other intellectually depends on our sharing a common foundation, a common language.

Articulate flesh

The auto-sufficiency of dance theory and its perception as obscure by many professional dance artists and producers, denies opportunities for fertile exchanges. It also keeps dance as an art form in an intellectual void in relation to other contemporary practices.

Recent waves of intelligent dancer practice, including the Klein Technique seem to perpetuate dancers, blind faith in the 'science' of the dancing body over its 'written uponness'. The emphasis within the contemporary dance community upon the 'knowing body', a body fluent, effortless and released, and informed by somatic disciplines, retains an almost modernist formalism and purity untainted by language. The refined, integrated and somatically informed body of the dancer is radically different from the leaky bodies prevalent in contemporary visual arts practice. For the body, frozen, stained, leaking and preserved, has become a major site of interrogation for both artists and critics within the visual arts. Witness the endeavours of Marc Quinn, Tracey Emin and Steve McQueen, the high profile exhibition, Spectacular

Bodies at the Hayward Gallery this autumn, and the critical writings which underpin this work as well as form a bridge between artist and audience by people like Sarah Kent, Adrian Searle and Matt Collings, critics who know their theory and can speak to and with practice. Since the 1970s, visual artists, following the work of people like Mary Kelley, Valie Export and Cindy Sherman, have been excavating the narrations of the body and this work has informed critical theory and debate. Despite the feeding frenzy of the tabloids around events like the Turner Prize, serious critical debate about visual artists and their work is accessible and engaging, and with frequent exposure makes people think through art.

All cells are cultural cells. There is no direct access to the body unmediated by the social, the discursive, and the linguistic. It is important for dancers to conduct a 'molecular politics', to win back their own organism, their own body on its own terms through intelligent and reflective practice, but I believe it is limiting to confine oneself to such a pursuit without addressing the role of language and vernacular culture in shaping and changing perception. A choreographer's defence of her position, 'it is just about dancing', avoids the possibility of theoretical readings and modes of enquiry and the potential exchange with theorists and professional thinkers. A parallel argument might be found in theatre, where David Hare in an article berates modern drama's reluctance to contemplate the world instead of its own navel, theatre in the metropolis being obsessed with a 'festival of style aerobics'.¹⁰

Academic writing about dance, seeks to unravel its significance within a range of discourses around culture, history, politics and anthropology. Much of this writing assumes dance to be a valid intellectual category of experience. I confess to being not that interested in dance per se. I have always considered the human body as the medium in my artistic work, and like many artists will use whatever means necessary to represent my ideas. The fact of being a dancer, makes dancing my most immediate expression, it is literally there, at my fingertips.

As I see it, the body is the principle sign that allows the power of history and history as construction to be experienced and to become visible and therefore changeable. In my work I view the body as both viscera and artefact, as a theatre of signs. However

performance is not reducible to a 'reading' of these signs as 'texts'. The dancing body disrupts the ideophilia of 'body as text' through its permeability, mutability and nonreproducibility. In performing, there is always an excess, an unknownness, the tripping up of perception and expectation which is largely unspoken. There is a loss of language when I journey into my body, as I begin to move through its labyrinths, I meet, fleetingly and only for a second that which my consciousness ordinarily cannot see and which cannot be spoken for. Indeed, in order to begin to move, I must first still the language inside my head.

Inscriptions

I have all this critical baggage, I hope you don't mind if I share some of it with you.¹¹ For a while, in my dancing, I worked to deconstruct some of the codes which I perceived to be marginalising the potentiality of the body beneath the tyranny of words. Dances, with titles like *The Anatomy of Reason* and *Flesh. TXT*, were created out of writing and theoretical investigations into the collisions between bodies and texts. They arose through the mediation of the body through a range of different languages, critical and theoretical as well as popular and personal. They were envisaged as attempts to embody theory through choreography, to inscribe the body within the critical parlance of feminist philosophy.

However I grew to understand that theory cannot be directly 'represented' in choreography. The different materialities of these practices, ensure that the one is not reducible to the other, nor can they be merged or juxtaposed very successfully. However ideas and theories, can be taken out of one medium and worked through another. This is an act of mediation in which the dance becomes the switching point, the locus, between thought and action, philosophy and choreography. This working through and out of theory is an ongoing process, it is part of what Janet Wolff terms in relation to feminism, seeing 'what theory can do for us in terms of practice'.

The American playwright, Arthur Miller, claims that 'the theatre we have is the theatre the critics have permitted us to have'.¹² By this Miller alludes to the canon of reviewed works, and the way in which criticism forms the canon, determining taste, futures, and ideologies. A parallel argument might be said to apply to dance criticism, which is instru-

mental in affording visibility to some artists and in privileging certain styles and genres of work over others as well as prioritising certain modes of criticism. But if the literary context for dance practice is to grow up, we need a broad spectrum of approaches and channels of writing. We need dance writers and publishers, who are knowledgeable of practice and who can also make connections with critical perspectives on the body. They need to be border runners between contemporary criticism, theory and practice. That is, they can read performance through philosophy and criticism and their styles of writing are readable, engaging and provocative. In this way they can provide alternative viewpoints whilst acknowledging the public's hunger for different ways of understanding dance. ○

Carol Brown is a choreographer and performer based in London and touring internationally with her company, Carol Brown Dances.

- 1 Frye, Marilyn. 'The body philosophical'. In Karmare, C & Spender, D. (eds.) *The Knowledge Explosion*. New York: Teachers College Press, 1992: 125.
- 2 Foster, Susan Leigh. *Choreographing History*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1995: 16.
- 3 Albright Cooper, Ann. 'Incalculable choreographies: the dance practice of Marie Chouinard'. In Goellner, Ellen W & Shea Murphy, Jacqueline. *Bodies of the Text*. New Jersey: Rutgers University Press: 1995: 157-181.
- 4 Eyre, Richard. 'Robert Lepage in discussion with Richard Eyre'. *Platform Papers*. London: Publications Department, Royal National Theatre, 1992: 30.
- 5 Spivak, Gaytri. 'Feminism and deconstruction, again: negotiating with unacknowledged masculinism'. In Brennan, Teresa. *Between Feminism and Psychoanalysis*. London and New York: Routledge, 1989: 206-233.
- 6 Brown, Carol. *Inscribing the Body: Feminist Choreographic Practices*. PhD Thesis. University of Surrey, 1994.
- 7 Wolff, Janet. 'The artist, the critic and the academic: feminism's problematic relationships to "Theory"'. In Deepwell, Katy (ed.) *New Feminist Criticism*. Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1995: 14-19.
- 8 *Machine for Living* is a seventy-minute work for four dancers moving within a metallic forest cut with light and animation designed by visual artist Esther Rolinson, and lighting designer Micky Mannion. It premiered at Brighton Corn Exchange on 5 October 2000.
- 9 Smith, Bryan. 'Looking out/looking in'. *Writings on Dance* Eight, Winter 1992: 28.
- 10 The ongoing debate over elitism versus accessibility was to my mind highlighted by the recent invitation to engage in critical debate through Catalytic Conversations 2: Future Alert. The invitation proposed: 'Agree or Disagree?... People don't need the Arts Council to dance, they salsa, tango and disco.'
- 11 Hare, David. *Guardian*, Saturday Review, 18 November 2000: 3.
- 12 Spoken text from the solo, *The Anatomy of Reason* (1994).
- 13 Miller, Arthur. Methuen, 1997: 136.