on tour

BRITISH DRAMA & DANCE 2002 #19

CROSS-CURRENTS

ARTS AND REFUGEES
CAROL BROWN
BLAST THEORY
EDINBURGH SHOWCASE
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JERWOOD CHOREOGRAPHERS

on tour

The British Council

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"IN AN ERA OF RAPID ADVANCES IN DIGITAL CULTURE, CONCEPTS OF VIRTUALITY INTRODUCE A SERIES OF QUESTIONS TO DANCE PERFORMANCE. THESE ARE INVITING PRACTITIONERS AND AUDIENCES TO CHANGE QUITE FUNDAMENTAL ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT THE PLACE OF PERFORMANCE, THE MATERIAL NATURE OF DANCING BODIES, AND THEIR RELATIONS TO SPACE AND TIME."

Carol Brown, Dancing In the Mediascape

dancing
in the mediascape

The real and the virtual; space, structure and the body...
Carol Brown discusses intersections between dance, architecture and technology ➤

Carol Brown Dance photos: Mattias Ek

What does it mean for a dancer to behave like a builder? What happens when architecture is not where you expect to find it? According to architect Daniel Libeskind, "the architects of the future will be the choreographers of the city". In encouraging actors to work on cities, to "abandon traditional acting and become fully engaged in transforming the city", Libeskind points to the displacement of artistic institutions and categories through a metamorphosis of its practitioners.[i]

As a London-based choreographer, I am currently engaged in practice-based research into the spaces between architecture, contemporary dance and technology. This research is enabled through an AHRB Research Fellowship in the Creative and Performing Arts hosted by the University of Surrey Roehampton. The fellowship enables me to investigate and reinvent some of the fundamental assumptions made about space, time and movement through my practice as a contemporary performing artist.

Dancing, as the manipulation and breakdown of space through bodily movement, has much in common with architecture. Space is a medium for both the choreographer and the architect, and questions of spatial design, scale of movement, perspective, site and location are crucial to both. In considering the affinities of these two disciplines I would like to suggest the transposing of architectural privilege into choreographic practice. This opens dance practice to questions of space, prising open the conventions of theatrical staging to other modes, between the real and the virtual.

Within the current moment we are experiencing a phase shift in culture to do with perceptions of space. This has been enabled through the increasing digitisation and media-tisation of our daily lives. New modalities of space are emerging through developments in telecommunications networks, information technologies and complex digital infrastructures. These are currently interpenetrating contemporary culture, eroding prior constructs of linear perspective and creating new technologies of perception. In this context, our assumptions about home, space and stage are being challenged.

Yet lines of influence are drawn according to an ancient model. For most dancers the stage endures as the dominant model of space. As those who make dance know, there is a key moment in choreographing when you are literally projecting the work on to the stage, into the theatre. As performing artists, we customise ourselves for the built environment of the theatre, measuring out the dimensions of the space and making the dance fit into these. The proscenium arch theatre, as a framed

space organised around a vanishing point, creates an illusion of depth, a site for the experience of both the spectacular and the intimate. This experience depends upon me taking up a position on 'stage' and you taking up a position, in the body of the theatre, its 'house'. This model of space has been 'home' for my creations and traditionally has contained our relations and styles of exchange. Whilst I wonder about this dancer with the theatre inside her, I am questioning the boundary of her dancing.

Libeskind describes how our notion of the classical stage "is really not fitting to contemporary reality being swallowed by space".[i] The grand narrative of introjection and projection, so characteristic of classicism and modernism, no longer holds firm. We enter a third space - translucent, screened, scanned. Digitalisation and virtuality have fundamentally altered the way

> "DANCING, AS THE MANIPULATION AND BREAKDOWN OF SPACE THROUGH BODILY MOVEMENT, HAS MUCH IN COMMON WITH ARCHITECTURE."

we look and are looked at. Contemporary bodies in the current moment are lived on the inside and networked on the outside. We are engaged in a phase shift in culture to do with scale, skin, perspective, distance, limits, interaction, presence, interior and exterior space. Newtonian physics no longer holds the floor. Skin, once the boundary of the self, no longer signifies closure; for technology is extending life expectancy, the physical environment, perception and memory.

What this means in a practical sense is a re-vision of how we understand the body in space. Rethinking the relationship between container and contents means moving beyond binaristic thinking to consider the entwining of systems. In dance it might be helpful to consider the body, not as a shell or surface that houses a depth or interiority, but as a material of space. As a choreographer this involves exploring bodily movement in terms of planes, rotations, convolutions, inflections and torsions, binding the choreography into the built environment at the level of a subtle

mechanics. Space, no longer a container for the body, becomes enfolded, amplifying the bodily realm into a kind of kinetic architecture.

Virtual environments encourage us to see space, not as a container or receptacle, but as an opening up and proliferation, a passage from one space to another, a space of change, a process of becoming. The question of presence within the virtual is key to digital culture. How can it be thought? How can it be built, lived, practised? What would virtual space feel like? How does the virtual permeate the real?

In contemplating some of these issues, I have been led to question the boundaries of a dance performance, and to open my practice to a series of collaborative dialogues with other artforms. These do not directly engage with virtual reality, but site choreography within architectural structures and digital forms, opening the practice of dance to a sense of learning to be otherwise. *Shelf Life*, *Nerve* and *Machine for Living* are part of this ongoing research into performing presence within mediated environments.

Shelf Life, commissioned in 1998 by South East Dance Agency, is an installation performance conceived in collaboration with visual artist, Esther Rolinson. In taking a domestic design component, a shelf, enlarging it, and siting a female body on it, the work creates a threshold in space, a literal edge intended as a site for the contemplation of the limits of the body. A narrow perspex shelf suspended two metres above the ground, and against a gallery wall, creates a physically restrictive environment for a solo dancing body, my own, over a four hour period. On the wall behind me a digitally manipulated body floats, divides, rotates and falls, extending the choreography into a space I cannot reach.

The shelf as an architectural fragment constitutes a raw interface between the cultural and the natural. The dancing body interfaced by the digital body becomes a theatre for memory, a site for the intermixing of past, present and future forms. This work, in being commissioned for gallery and live art spaces, is framed within the conditions of gallery culture. Audiences are invited to enter the space at any time and to stay as long as they wish. The work has been sited in a range of locations including a disused brewery in Prague, the foyer of the National Theatre in Rome and the North Wall of St Pancras Church in London. The siting of the installation impacts upon it in dramatic ways suggesting its pliability to multiple renderings.

Nerve (2001) similarly deals with a physically restrictive environment but is concerned with exterior rather than interior space. This project was developed in col-

laboration with the architect Stewart Dodd, of the London architectural firm, Satellite Design, originally with the support of a Jerwood Choreography Award. In this performance, I am interested in an architectural intervention that alters not just how two dancers move through space, but their stability and balance, by questioning the assumption of a flat surface for dancing. Stewart Dodd's wave form asphalt ramp tips a man and a woman into unexpected points of contact and improbable postures. The piece was inspired by the ease with which skateboarders ride the surfaces of the city. The choreography is shaped by movement over the contours of the structure and compression of its two surfaces. Audiences experience the piece from either side of the 'road' enabling up close visions of the piece. Sound artist Russell Scoones has sampled urban textures from Philadelphia, Rome and London to not only accompany the performance, but to impale the structure. The dancers' bodies, as they crash and collide, encounter the frictive surface of the asphalt becoming a material of space, and suggesting a continuity with the fabric of the city and its flows.

Machine for Living (2000-2001), in quoting Le Corbusier's concept of the 'Machine House', employs the language of architecture in both its process and presentation. Esther Rolinson and I conceived of the wall, that most conventional of architectural forms, as a mutable structure. A series of permeable surfaces - perforated steel, skin and digital animation - intersect creating moiring patterns which give the sense of a liquid state in which body and contain-

er form a continuous whole. Five performers move through this environment as if through a metallic forest, forming intimate moments and brutal fractures of space within Michael Mannion's sculpted lighting. The piece, in creating an immersive experience for performers and audience alike, attempts to dissolve the privileged perspectival position of traditional theatre with its fixed seating, in favour of multiple perspectival positions. Confronted with a series of possibilities for viewing, each audience member creates their own mix, engaging with the performance as a physical journey, and composing their own stories from a series of tableaux and interactions. Viewed as an architectural promenade the work intends to exist at the intersection between traditional perspectival thought (evidenced in the presence of the dancers as mobile stages), a kind of distorted modernism (in the play on Corbusier's concept of home), and digital culture (through an animation series which morphs the whole).

These three works, sited at the interface between dance and architecture, attempt to embody questions about performer-spectator relationships, the place of performance, and perceptions of space in the digital age. The capacity of shelves, ramps and walls to become transformative and manipulable objects in a performance space suggests the possibility of being otherwise. It is about considering how the virtual resonates through the real. Virtuality, I tell my impoverished and resource deficient dance students, is not just out there in computer science and digital arts labora-

tories, inaccessible to most, but in here, a way of thinking about the world.

The idea of the virtual, prevalent since at least the time of Plato, is not new. Yet in an era of rapid advances in digital culture, concepts of virtuality introduce a series of questions to dance performance. These are inviting practitioners and audiences to change quite fundamental assumptions about the place of performance, the material nature of dancing bodies, and their relations to space and time.

As a choreographer, the place of the dance, its context or space of habitation traditionally defines its terms of reference. Previously I have followed inherited wisdom and described my work as Dance Theatre. However more recently I have shifted to consider a practice called Installation Performance. The term suggests that something is being installed; is being accreted to a specific space; and that we are thereby also modelling the space of interaction, determining or suggesting certain kinds of exchange between performer and spectator, art and community.

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For further information on Carol Brown Dances, see Company Profiles.

i The Space of Encounter, Thames and Hudson, 2001 p70