

Tess de Quincey

Compression Response Trilogy

To dance a city

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Compression 100 - Sydney was a performance event that took place in Sydney, Australia 1st – 31st May 1996. It was scheduled as over one hundred performances during the calendar month in different venues and sites around the metropolitan area. Asking if a city could be danced, Stuart Lynch and I made collaborations with over one hundred artists from various disciplines including dancers, writers, musicians and visual artists.

Can a city be danced? We are looking to gauge the physical and metaphysical character of this particular city as an environment, as an arena, as a stage, as a mesh; the performer as receiver rather than a transmitter. Can we engage the validity of each individual space and its relation to a greater totality? To what extent do artists form the shape, sound and feeling of a city? Where are the crossover-points that spark? Can the city's geist and consciousness be tapped - be performed?

This piece of writing is the first part in a trilogy covering my own process of response to *Compression 100*. Besides my current thoughts, it contains extracts from our (De Quincey/ Lynch) previous writings.

The 1st of May 1996 I embarked with my partner Stuart Lynch on a performance event which stated its intent to "be danced by" the city of Sydney. Our wish was to catch the artistic gridding and state of performance exuding from this specific city space at that specific time. We also wanted to question ourselves, the definitions of different aspects of performance language and our own position within the performance/dance world. Over the thirty-one days of the calendar month our originally scheduled grid of one hundred and eleven "performative meetings" extended to include over one hundred and sixty individually conceived performances covering different genres, a large number of which involved collaborations with more than one hundred local Sydney artists. Some days there were only one or two performances, but mostly there were at least three or four, utilising

all kinds of outside and inside venues and sites throughout Sydney. All performances were intended for open viewing and, with the exception of two, were free of charge for the presenter/host and for the audiences.

The presentation of various aspects of compression - the nature of pressure itself - was perceived as an integral part of the concept on every level. Rather than the presentation of a hyperactivity, the preoccupation was to suggest that the flow of material initiated by pressure would induce a 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.

When we stepped into the first day of May, it became clear that a river had started. We had, with many others, planned areas of its course, but its final winding form began first then to emerge and took us and our collaborators along with it. The "flow" extended into an all-encompassing river. We were borne along. The process of thinking, of planning and relating under such circumstances takes on the nature of swimming - one is immersed and is formed by the nature and movement of this water. Elements were brought together in a way that would never have happened in "normal" circumstances of considered planning and a longer contemplation. We were moved, from one space to another, facing often violent juxtapositions and contradictions of context - the nature of each audience - and the expectations created by both of these factors.

As a performer, the meeting of one's internal space and sense of breathing with the external space became a vital check point; the relation to an equilibrium was always in question. Adjustments to speed, and a sense of gearing became a strong focus. Quiet internal spaces had to open up, resting points to re-adjust one's focus and perspec-

tive. This breathing came to feel like the determinative point for a gyration to occur, both in myself and in the space.

The events included collaborations with Sydney-based artists representing a broad spectrum of disciplines and genres; with local individuals, groups and institutions; as well as choreographies for and with specific groups (opera groups, open workshops, a core group of dancers, individuals, etc.). Collaborating artists were chosen by consultants from four fields - visual arts, text, music and performance. As we wished the choice of artists to come from a broad and objective spectrum, we used the expertise of consultants because we specifically wished to avoid just operating through our own friends and predictable networks. Our brief to the consultants was to identify artists from within their field who represented clearly defined artistic concerns from different generations and ethnic backgrounds. In outlining the nature of the basic concept and its parameters, we invited collaborators (most of whom we had never met before) to meet us in performance in whichever way they felt most suitable and relevant to their area of work. In finding the gauge or spirit of Sydney, the ground tenet of *Compression 100* was to allow a performance language to take form within the meeting of these varying approaches, histories and artistic disciplines. The emphasis was on the act of performance itself, be it on Internet, on the radio or on a live audience to performer basis, supporting a spontaneity and immediacy rather than a pre-rehearsed meeting. Our intent was that *Compression 100* should stress experimentation and would research the area where language is shaped by the works themselves. We indicated that the character of meeting could take many different forms, from the strongly direct and confrontational to the indirect and obscure; it could involve a piece of work finished years ago or something the

collaborator would like to make specifically for *Compression 100*. The majority had a clearly planned strategy. Only a few were approached on the basis of a pure improvisation. Several 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.

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Compression 100 was offered as an event free-of-charge, in the high-rise of the CBD (Central Business District) and down-town harbour area out through different ethnically defined suburbs to the Blue Mountains in the west and the reaches of the northern and southern coastline. This ranged from small-scale individually run spaces to private businesses, organisations, large-scale corporate concerns to government institutions. The final grid included public fountains, theatres, ferries, bathing sheds, private and state galleries, bamboo forests, jails, tunnels, hospitals, kindergartens, Sydney Opera House, schools, casinos, animal pounds, universities, places of worship, cinemas, trains, cemeteries, museums, monasteries, etc. Responses from potential hosts varied from very warm welcomes to suspicious, uncomfortable accession and studied avoidance. Interestingly enough, the offer of providing a funded but free performance seemed to undermine the sense of self-determination in certain "art" institutions - possibly feeling an obligation to host a *Compression 100* event because of the all-embracing impetus and funding implications of the project. We also offered our services as choreographers and/or performers free of

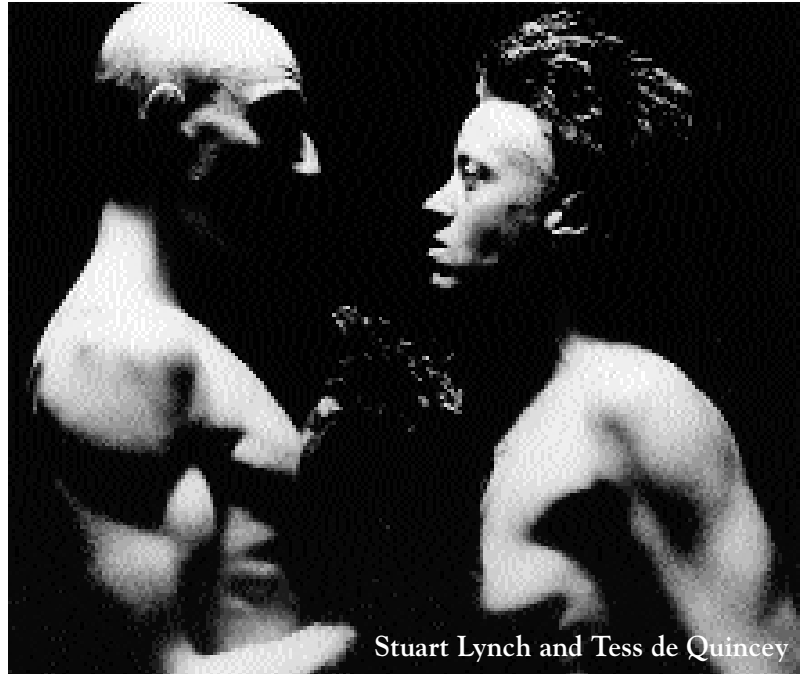
charge to universities and to schools opening the project to students for observation and participation.

The performing grid was constructed on the basis of the response from artists, institutions and venues. The composition of the grid aimed to provide the most productive programming of daily works to extract investigative performance structures, formulas and language. It was composed so as to vary the broad spectrum of disciplines and genres involved, juxtaposing the spatial, historical and sociological perspectives alongside the choice of genre or cross-disciplinary practice. As multifarious events spanning various disciplines and involving varying collaborations, the intent with *Compression 100* was to work the full range of performance language, from the durational through to the theatrical ... and having this happen on a daily and multiple basis. The performances did indeed range from time-based performance-art pieces through pure dance, theatre and text-based works. In providing a vehicle for multiform encounters and the materialisation of ideas, the aim was to examine the definition and language of dance and performance. The intense pressure of this "grid" of performance works was designed to optimise an immediate and collaborative performance state, allowing for a responsive rather than a conceived language to occur; allowing the practice to provoke the theory. We wished to address the notion and definition of performance as it relates to a Butoh language, cross disciplinary practices, and a "hyper-performance state" - or a "hyperflow". Even though our language is deeply based in the Butoh tradition, we wanted to posit this as a more flexible and mobile performance language, be it in relation to artists of enormously different backgrounds, disciplines and attitudes. Is a performance project, through collaborations, able to gauge the performative character of

Sydney?

Each performance had to be evaluated in accordance with the “contract” that each situation presented in terms of space, time, audience, history, expectations, etc.; from the high kitsch parade - an absolutely fabulous Butoh homage at Circular Quay - to performing for three hundred terminally ill children (thirty as immediate audience and two hundred and seventy on video relay); then to dance for maximum security “life” prisoners before performing for an “art-house” gallery opening. This relay was not, and never intended to be, heroic or indeed masochistic; it was to provide a position to perceive a performative “movement” whereby each situation, each performance had to be acutely felt and understood - physically, intuitively and intellectually.

The differences presented in situations according to a male/female aspect was manifested to an extreme in the instance of male and female prisons. A complete and utter polarity of differences emerged and provided me, as a woman, with a totally encompassing scale of measurement by which to record and judge my own responses. The lyricism and fluid speed of communicative flow from women was in violent contradiction to the provocative and aggressive bounce of testosterone from the men. In both cases, humour laced a necessary line in the entirety of the exchange while its mobilisation, placement and function, along with such issues as dignity, fear, belief, self-transformation and self-sabotage seemed to operate in very different terms. And yet in both instances, despite the differences, the establishment of a mutual acceptance and sense of solidarity as a human had to come clearly from the guts.



Stuart Lynch and Tess de Quincey

I am now beginning to think in terms of the breathing of a space; the gearing of each situation and circumstance.

A project of this size and scope inevitably takes on its own impetus and in effect has a “rolling” that allows situations and ideas to take shape and be realised where they might otherwise not occur or remain on the drawing board of the mind. It creates energy. Something is suddenly allowable and things can happen very easily. The infrastructure and the impetus create a performative viability, a validity of trying things out purely because they are within reach of the general flow of the events. Situations can be included, ideas embraced and taken on within the step, purely because of the nature of the flow of energy and general availability and mobility of resources.

We were trying to avoid a “clever” relation, looking rather for a felt, instinctive tying. One then finds oneself in the land of the ritual, being a formal “conductor”. How to find the way to release into the situation totally, to realise and to feel where and how to place oneself - what has to be done for the situation now? A gyration point - minute

balance, suspended, no tension - from which to go any way in any direction; a conscious placement. Just the realisation of the moment - the body as a carrier of relation, of time:

to dance a city
the rise and fall of a space
a breathing relation to process
inherent integrity and placement of space
within the performative situation
honesty, vulnerability confronted with
the architecture of body
architecture of the imagination
the specific expectations of that place
and that time
scale, perspective, focus
weight, density, transience of each
circumstance
the pacing
the animal
relation to history, time, place
an exalted moment
gauging points, small truths, under
standings, misunderstandings
material that makes up dance
the substance that flows and switches
go backwards, sideways and around
negotiating the space and the time

We wished to be danced by the proposition of *Compression 100* and to suggest it as a concept for others. We saw it as a means to develop a nuanced relation to one's own practice in relation to others and to the environment. How flexible can one be in response to a given set of circumstances, how subordinate? How respectful or nihilistic is the resulting decision and how relatively successful was the choice? The quality of the questions and propositions offered and put forwards by ourselves, hosts, collaborators and audiences provoked the necessity

and belief of the response.

These were finite and finished works; they were not sketches or "works in progress". If one perceived them as such, one has missed the point. (Stuart Lynch)

Compression provided a vehicle for multi-form encounters and the materialisation of ideas. The sheer amount of performance material that came from works such as these is enormous and is still, more than a year later, difficult to come to terms with. I have yet to answer many questions that begin to make themselves known.

De Quincey/Lynch: *Compression 100* - Sydney, was supported by The Australia Council and the NSW Ministry for the Arts. *Documentation, critiques and record of performances* is available on request from the artists.

TESS DE QUINCEY (Australia) spent five years working in Japan with Min Tanaka's Mai-Juku Performance Company and then resided in Europe creating and touring a number of performances using her Butoh training. She has initiated special projects across the globe with her company Body Weather, including work in the outback of Australia and in Central India.