

# Jacky Lansley

## A Fierce Silence

*... it is easy to perceive  
how the subjective dancer  
who articulates,  
publicly or privately,  
the intricacies of her practice -  
can become highly subversive  
in her refusal  
to be packaged,  
commodified and neutered.*

### CORPS DE BALLET

Dance as the "silent" art form and, as some postmodern perspectives describe it "an art of erasure" seems to offer a space in which and on which the non-dancer<sup>1</sup> can inscribe his or her ideas, passions, fantasies and fears. It is as though the fantasy of participation, the longing for participation, obscures the presence of the dancing body - the dancing body which historically has usually been female. The dancer's space and history has become colonised by the spectator/writer/theorist and the mediation of new technology. These colonisers are not obvious oppressors and yet a difficult and complex relationship has been created between the industry of the secondary text and dance practice.

The questioning of ontological models of subjectivity and perception is, of course, a familiar feature of the contemporary theoretical landscape. A number of interlocking theoretical discourses which include semiotics has shifted meaning from the subjective "I" to signifying systems, abandoning a dialogue with phenomenological processes.<sup>2</sup>

Feminism, too, has made use of and furthered deconstruction and the process of depersonalising experience by proposing that subjectivity is discursively constituted, and a function of cultural, political and socio-economic systems. The intention of these discussions was to free-up great systems of patriarchal thought and belief which marginalised and indeed made invisible women in many

---

1. The term "non-dancer" has been used for the purposes of this discussion. It could be argued that there is no such person; that the division in our society between the creative and the non-creative, the artist and the non-artist, is false, separating many people from their birthright to dance, and in the process creating an oppressive envy of artists who do.

2. See Stanton B. Garner's discussion of phenomenology and performance in which he draws on a set of theoretical strategies associated with the philosophical tradition founded by Edmund Husserl. These ideas are set in dialogue with, for example, the positions of Michel Foucault and Jacques Derrida. *Bodied Spaces: Phenomenology and Performance in Contemporary Drama*; Cornell University Press 1994.

areas of their lives. However, some feminists are now problematising the blurring of, for example, gender difference, and arguing for stopping points within this endlessly shifting postmodern landscape which seems to defy the clarity necessary for political change. Linking these concerns to women's performance practice, I would argue that a discussion of the actual bodied space of the performance artist, particularly the female performance artist, has been neglected in the now extensive industry of cultural criticism. Intricate performance methods concerned with, for example, theatricality in relation to art, the presence of the objective/subjective dichotomy in performance and the importance of pleasure in the efficacy of performing, have been by-passed by linguistic projects which place emphasis on the interplay of theoretical discourses at the expense of the performer's subjective experience. Dance practice, which is the site of bodied experience and entirely dependent on visceral corporeality<sup>3</sup> is therefore at a disadvantage within this theoretical landscape, and is somehow, I will argue, left stranded and infantilised.

The presence of dancers, particularly ballet dancers, is strangely contradictory. The muscular effort and sweat is disguised in order to create the illusion of weightlessness and ephemerality. Women dancers (and more men now too) place tremendous pressures on themselves to conform to this ideal, leading to problems such as anorexia and other eating disorders which are well documented. Yet despite the impact of fashion on

---

3. This positioning of the "reality" of the dancer's experience and subjectivity has been problematised through notions of, for example, the "embodied" writer; and so I, like others, am forced to mount a counter position that questions the certainty of the postmodernist attack on subjectivity.

the ballet dancer's body, ballet, as a contemporary art form, remains stubbornly outside cultural discourse as a spectacle of hermetic codes. The radical intentions of much of the work in the wider context of Contemporary and New Dance practice places an emphasis on the investigation of form and structure rather than theatrical and narrative concerns. It has a modernist awareness of the body and movement uncluttered with that which is unnecessary to its art. The image of the athletic un-gendered "free" dancer promises a more healthy experience from that of the distorted and fetishised ballerina. However the spectacle of the postmodern dancer can create, I would argue, a different problematic perspective, particularly if we agree that postmodern strategies are not in themselves oppositional. Postmodern dance which is concerned with critical deconstruction of traditional forms and archetypes, raids and exploits cultural codes and forms in order to question and effect change. More reactionary forms of postmodern dance play with historical dance languages uncritically, exploiting both conventional and "new" codes without questioning them. Within this work the image of the body as a minimal blank landscape, or as a highly theatricalised body which can parody anything, anywhere, anytime, can become a mere cipher for other industries; its mobile blankness becoming an ideal form onto which other commodities can be grafted. From this perspective it is easy to perceive how the subjective dancer who articulates, publicly or privately, the intricacies of her practice - can become highly subversive in her refusal to be packaged, commodified and neutered.

### **HUMOROUS FLESH AND BONES**

*Do my shoes reflect the quality of my intellect?  
By framing my question in such a way I invite  
you the spectators to look upon me the  
performer and to think about what I as a body*

*in this space, as a female body in this space,  
represent and mean.*

Jacky Lansley, 1998

The question in the title of my performance (*Do My Shoes Reflect the Quality of My Intellect?*) draws attention to the subjective/objective dichotomy of the female performer or person, and the idea that women, despite so called feminist gains, are still defined and judged by appearance. The performance text investigates a range of ideas concerning the *presence* and *absence* of the female body, merging theatrical discourses with wider philosophical and ethical considerations brought on, for example, by contemporary scientific trends and the aggressive implications of a culture obsessed with deconstruction.

*If I choose to dance silently it doesn't mean that  
I have no voice because it is absent... Does it?*

(Ibid)

The coherence of my "character" - a kind of comic professor giving a bizarre lecture - enabled varied discourses surrounding the idea of the invisible body to surface, while being contradicted by my very present and vocal performance. Playfully referencing and misquoting Derridian discourse concerning the metaphysics of presence and absence, I attempted to physically inhabit the ideas, and show how the body as a site of corporeal and subjective elements resists reduction to the merely textual. Through my direct questions to the audience I drew them into an investigation which exposed a deeper uneasiness with the body which runs through much poststructuralist criticism, while paradoxically using these arguments to explore the complexities of the female performer's presence (and absence). My professor quite literally put certain hypo-theses to the test, noting that some arguments seemed to fall

apart when separated from obscure deconstructive prose. At one point my professor performed the notion of "centre" through a series of epic gestures which attempted to distil terms related to fundamentals such as: ESSENCE; EXISTENCE; SUBSTANCE. My somewhat absurd choreographic positions, which in themselves were highly intertextual, produced much laughter; however the success of the moment was not, I believe, concerned only with the visual language of the gestures but how they were performed. My unquestionable presence at that moment was acquired through an exact skill concerned with ideas such as active stillness, the breathing body, the ability to create lines and shapes held through exact muscular control, a sense of physical dilation and fullness, a complete understanding of the narrative of the movement/position and the ability to physically express that narrative. These are elements which are dependent on the subjective experience of the performing dancer - only aspects of which can be identified visually.

My discussion incorporated, too, the space in which I worked and within which my presence was framed. My "set", for example, consisted of two black flats in the centre of the space with a four-foot gap between them. This gap was explored extensively, the audience were never allowed to forget the visible space between the flats, and the invisible space behind them as I played with appearance and disappearance. Part of my "lecture" involved a series of slides, or visual clues, of single words such as LACK, PRESENCE, ABSENCE, OTHER, SCOPOPHILIA made comic, and therefore dialectic, with the use of absurd and different type-faces styled according to the ideas involved. This framing of words, well known within cultural theoretical discourse, was not an attempt to dismantle or abuse the ideas they represented, but rather to look at

the relationship between linguistic and embodied definitions, and the negotiation that is required between often quite temporary cultural prescriptions.

The title, while provocative and long, may have led some people to anticipate a discourse on shoes. In fact shoes were used quite playfully as vehicles for shifting argument and emphasis: very different styled shoes were introduced at different moments in the performance as key signifiers of meaning and text (quite literally, since my "opening" shoes were covered with words as was my overall costume) and as comic juxtaposition. As part of this shoe text I introduced a pair of tiny baby shoes and explored with my audience the idea that they were small enough for a baby to wear inside my body. I examined this hypothesis by placing the tiny shoes in various positions on my body in the approximate location of my reproductive organs suggesting the various states of being which the baby could be considering, such as RELAXED, A DANCER, COMPOSED: AN ALTERNATIVE, BREACH, ENGAGED. This physical lecture then progressed into a slow moving dance during which I carefully balanced one tiny baby shoe on my large boot held in an attitude while balancing and turning. The slowness of this quite difficult dance and its determined sense of presence combined with the deliberate physical reference to the internal and external female landscape prevented the spectators, too, from avoiding or shifting from the deliberate text of the piece which was concerned with the fully present female body. The choreography and absurd idea of shoes inside me allowed, I believe, the audience to engage positively with images and ideas surrounding the female body and its reproductive system; ideas that have become strangely complex within a society that seems determinedly unsupportive of the female body - or any-

body for that matter. A further question I asked of my audience was "do we own our bodies?" which my professor asked in a comically fierce and demanding way. The question seemed to produce, without fail, quite a degree of hysterical laughter which revealed a knowing sense of the absurd relevance of the question within a culture bent on undermining what should, of course, be a basic birthright.

### **DISCOVERED CENTRE**

What, after all, is this obsession with dance and the dancer within Western culture? The paradox is that the practice of dance and dancers is not ephemeral at all, it is highly empirical and substantive, and of course like speaking, a social act, produced by and part of cultural and social discourses. Its processes of development are precise within its different codes and practices. Any moment which defines itself as dance, whether classical, folk, modern or postmodern, shifts away from the ordinary and into the stylised and particular (this is also true of dance that exploits mundane and "everyday" movement language); that moment requires precise practice and repetition for its creation. The process may be very time consuming, which can prevent the dance practitioner from participating in the wider arena of cultural construction of the art form, as we are literally engrossed in the daily repetition of dance practice within a separate space - of necessity a private, almost hidden space. Like many other workers the actual experience and craft of dancers becomes hidden and anonymous, overlaid by the processes of a hierarchical cultural industry which is only concerned with final products or evaluations that fit its own agendas. The overriding justification for this relationship is that a dancer's experience is "merely" subjective and therefore not accurate, or, because it is body-centred, even rational. Dance as a

silent art form, it is suggested, needs the legitimising process of "objective" criticism.

Is the interest in dance at the turn of the century not a celebration of dance but an obsession with the bodied space - the disappearing bodied space? Dance, while many things, is fundamentally a celebration of the breathing rhythmic body and "the thinking body". It is the site where mind and body are permitted to co-exist as an expression, perhaps, of the whole body, while elsewhere it is being deconstructed and fragmented, its physical integrity under threat from modern social systems and science.

Cultural industry's obsession with owning the physical space that dancers locate, with harnessing the methodologies, knowledge and experience of dance practice into two dimensional virtual and written forms, suggests a wider obsession with the natural power and knowledge of the body, particularly the female body, and a persistent belief that knowledge and rationality are somehow located outside of the body. This position ignores, or simply fails to recognise, the complex and varied languages of the body in dance, the science of its craft and the knowledge distilled within its lore. A dance in motion is always complex and different, involving traces of the "not now" in the "now". However this does not and should not diffuse the presence of the dancer in space. Acknowledging traces of past and future within the dance is not simply a spectator sport, it is not only visual understanding, it is the very *telos* of the dance involving a precise use of shape and energy, a visceral sensing of the body in space and a detailed understanding of gravity and momentum. A structure of a fall in space, for example, will, as a narrative of movement, promise a recovery or a crash. The choreographic language involves, therefore, the dynamics of present, past and future; a simultaneity of moments performed by an

individual dancer or an ensemble which can be choreographically explored and *physically* theorised.

As dance is completely three dimensional, involving always the invisible internal life of the dancer, it can defy semiotisation, its "discussion" can only, perhaps, come from the subjective dancer. Certain techniques of dance encourage an awareness of the anatomy of the dancing body, and the organs moving through space. Following is part of a description of the dancer Lisa Kraus working, by the dance practitioner and founder of Mind Body Centering, Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen:

*She has a sense of volume - it is very much about three-dimensional space, gravity, emotion and suspension. Her skeleton and limbs are shaping through the organs: they are an outgrowth of the movement of the organs. A lift through her heart gives the suspension. Her arms are releasing into her lungs, her heart is lifting the chest upward, and her pelvic organs are flowing out through her legs. The feeling quality in the organs is generating the form of her posture.*

Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen, 1993

Our internal organs are part of the substance of who we are and, inevitably, part of our presence. However the postures, shapes and positions that our bodies take up have a direct impact on our internal space and volume. Organs can literally be squashed, bones pushed out of place by the continuous bad use of body shape and posture. If we look at the fashion-determined, often grotesquely thin shapes of models with rounded shoulders, collapsed chests and thrust forward hips we witness the denial of the body's internal space. A woman who is made to conform to the visual needs of a masculine society may leave her own sexuality and femaleness behind because it is

uncomfortable, threatening, or simply unfashionable.

### EXCITE AND ENTRANCE

The act of performance allows one to be larger than life and fully present in a way that a woman might not be permitted in "real life". During the process of inhabiting space the body is dilated and literally expands to fill the moment. It is this inhabiting of the performance material that creates presence. In this sense the notion of presence is not a philosophical abstract idea, it is a process, a recognition that within the performance context there is a layered meaning to presence involving, for example, physiological presence (the skeletal, muscular and nervous systems); emotional presence (the relationship between the performer and audience and how this energy is harnessed); textual presence (the embodying of the narrative and character of the text). Dance is unavoidably dependent on the energy, breath and visceral reality of the body for its being, and dependent on the presence of the dancer for its happening. When produced as a secondary visual film language, or as a written text, the presence of the dancer is still required at some point within the process - unless of course that process involves a computerised cyborg in virtual space. We could, however, decide to create a boundary and suggest that for dance to be dance it requires the presence of the physical body whether young, old, disabled, male or female. It requires the presence of task, risk and the vulnerability that the dancing body emanates. It is the dynamic of art through shape, movement, spatial relationships, and difference.

The process of disallowing dancers' bodies their difference is a reflection of a much more pervasive surveillance and control over the body in society. The fully present body, it seems, releases such a potent force that it has to be marginalised, and in

particular the present female body. Various forces within early 21<sup>st</sup> century capitalism - whether the fashion industry, the industries of genetic engineering and technological obstetric, or the industry of postmodern culture - give more legitimacy to the mimesis of the secondary text than the primary body. Perhaps there are texts that cannot be translated and never should be.

Reference:  
Jacky Lansley - extract from show text *Do My Shoes Reflect the Quality of My Intellect?* first performed in March 1998. Source material taken from *Structuralism and Since*, Ed. John Sturrock published by Oxford University Press 1979.  
Bonnie Bainbridge Cohen *Sensing, Feeling, and Action* (p 37) Contact Editions, Northampton MA 1993.



JACKY LANSLEY (Britain) is a performance artist and choreographer based in London, a founder of innovative groups such as X6 Dance Space, Strider and Limited Dance Company, and a founding editor of *New Dance Magazine*. She is visiting lecturer in performance studies at King Alfred's College, Winchester, and the University of North London and is an external advisor for The Wimbledon College of Art. Her new performance project *Bird* will be touring in 2001 and she is also writing and producing a choreographic film *The Life Class*.

Jacky Lansley in *L'Autre* Photo: Hugo Glendinning