

Paper Presented at Symposium on Collaboration in Performance Practice

University of Middlesex

May 4th 2012

***LandMark*: A Collaborative Exploration of the Interrelationships**

Between Action, Memory and Space.

The performance/installation, *LandMark* (2011) was created by dancers Deborah Saxon and Henry Montes in collaboration with the visual artist Bruce Sharp for the Siobhan Davies Commissions at the Bargehouse. For dance critic Katerina Pantelides the work 'successfully conveys both the arbitrary nature of memory and the sense of fulfilment inherent in making moving narratives from fragments' (Pantelides, 2011).

Drawing on the philosopher Maurice Merleau-Ponty's later development of existential phenomenology (1968), I will suggest that in *LandMark* the artists may also be understood to probe the complexities of the interrelationship between consciousness-world and self-other that remain something of an enigma even within modern science and philosophy. Thus the very terrain explored in this work is pertinent to the experience of artistic collaboration in which the work created may be understood to be produced through the reciprocal creative interplay of those involved. In pursuing this area of inquiry my aim is to work towards developing an understanding of how an 'ecological' approach to understanding art may be fruitful in the exploration of current approaches to performance making.

However, it is, important to state at the outset, that interviews with the makers of *LandMark*, demonstrate that they certainly did not set out to represent philosophical concepts or some sort of artistic manifesto. Rather, dance artists, Saxon and Montes were initially inspired by an exhibition of the photographs of William Eggleston at the Victoria Miro gallery. For them, a sense of the relationship between living spaces and their (absent) residents revealed the lingering facticity of presence. As Montes stated, Egglestone's evocative images also suggested how, through time, 'what is left behind takes on a different significance' (Montes, in conversation with the author, 11th June, 2011). Montes was also

struck by the plight of those whose homes had been lost to Australian bush fires: the total destruction of place meant a loss of all traces of a previous existence. These, then were the ideas that informed the dancers' initial concerns with the interrelationship between action, memory and place.

In developing the choreography, the site of the dancers' investigations became the associative connections that provide the glue binding together coherent narratives of past experience: The dancers worked to suggest both the interrelationship of the senses in the act of remembering and, at the same time, how the traces of the past can become disassembled and reconstituted. They came to realise that, through the use of repetition they could create associations between movement fragments and the sounds they made. With the intention of creating movement that 'saturates' the space (Saxon in conversation with the author, 6th May, 2011), their aim was to provide for a strongly visceral relationship with a simple sound such as whistling that, impressing itself into the experience of the audience, would provide for a tension between the continuing sound and the visual impact of a new, different movement being performed. Other creative strategies also mined this sense of disjuncture: Montes, for instance, explored making a guttural snoring while contrasting repose with wakeful actions; while further investigation of the visceral connection between sound and action led to Saxon making a strange half whine, half sob while performing a curious wiggling of the hips and to Montes coughing to the point of choking while attempting to complete a series of gestural actions set in counterpoint to the rhythmic spasms of his chest.ⁱ At times, in performance, this coughing dance seems to interrogate the relationship between consciousness and motor systems in a manner that often unsettles people. In forcing attention on the complex interrelationship between reflex actions, habits and learned gestures Montes brings into focus how the self is constructed through that frail covenant between the physical and social demands of human existence that is so hard to decipher.

It is this experience of the interplay of the organic workings of physical being, consciousness and the social realm that may be understood from the perspective of Merleau-Ponty's rethinking of the relationship between body and world. Merleau-Ponty (1968) questions the more traditional phenomenological distinction between the objective body (in itself) and the phenomenal body (for itself). He reconceptualises the relationship between body as object to others and body as sensing others recognising the 'double nature of the body as a thing among things' that is also the source of what is seen and touched (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, 143). This emphasis on the reciprocal relationship between self-other leads Merleau-Ponty to challenge the separation of subject and object. Instead he suggests instead potential sites of 'intertwining.' *LandMark*, may be seen as proposing such a realm of mutual reciprocity. Where Merleau-Ponty posited 'a presumptive domain of the visible and the tangible, which extends further than the things I touch and see at present' (1968, 143), the dancers inhabit a shared space in which we may become aware of the traces of their many years of dancing together.ⁱⁱ The dancers' memories seem to extend beyond self to the

other, thus allowing for the ease in which they are able to take over the 'residues' of each other's movement (Saxon in conversation with the author, 6th May, 2011) or respond to one another's gestures.

This sense of a shared history also imbues moments of disrupted connection between the dancers, or between the dancers and their own bodies. Saxon and Montes mine that experience of dislocation that is only possible in the context of a previous familiarity. In one fragment, Montes grabs Saxon's thighs and she gently places his hands back on his own legs before both dancers turn away, only to return: retracing their steps they repeat the action as if they are continuously re-remembering a moment of separation. At other times the dancers seem lost to themselves and to each other, their actions searching or trying to catch a part of themselves. Saxon can be seen searching her own body while elsewhere Montes seems unable to catch his last step. Merleau-Ponty never slips into an easy dissolving of boundaries between self-other and such moments may serve to suggest that sense of divergence, not only between self and other but in our own grasping of ourselves (Merleau-Ponty, 1968, 146-147). It is also worth reflecting here that Saxon and Montes' experiences as dancers have meant at times working together closely and intensively and at others hardly seeing each other. Even in developing the choreography opportunities to rehearse had to be fitted around complicated personal schedules which often meant long gaps between rehearsals during which contact relied on a few emails. This mix of intense proximity and separation is a common experience for performers and the ability to re-engage with one another and material that has been co-created relies on a shared responsibility for an intercorporeal domain.

For logistical reasons most of the movement investigation had to be completed before the dancers could work with the installation. In preparation, Bruce Sharp created flicker books in response to the dancers' rehearsals. Suspended downwards, hanging off filaments of thread, they intersect the space bringing both dancers and audience into a direct relationship with the artist's memories of the dancers' previous actions. Situating the recurring, durational performance amongst these books suggests how it is not only the (visible) body that saturates the very fabric of the lived world. Hanging in the room they evoke how the space is thick with memories and their tactile quality encourages a play between visual and physical interaction with the work. Sourced from both video recordings and Sharp's observations of the dancers, some books are cinematic, capturing Saxon crawling or Montes gesturing, others reveal rather more curious intertexts that punctuate both the space and the consciousness of those onlookers who momentarily flick through them. Saxon aimed for the books to provide 'pockets of images' that are traces of the imagination or 'ripples of thought' (Saxon in conversation with the author, 6th May, 2011) that make manifest the artists' consciousness in responding to the dance. On reflection, Sharp envisages the books as providing 'bridges between different moments of being' and

as 'holding time' (Sharp, in conversation with the author, 29th March, 2012). Having agreed the general concept with Sharp, Saxon bravely gave him free reign to contribute his personal response to her and Montes' rehearsals and the result seems to emphasise the ways in which an audience brings their own consciousness, including a sense of motility and duration, to the act of engaging with dance.

In preparing to work with the installation the dancers had created movement fragments that allowed for a certain improvisatory flexibility, but in the short period that they could rehearse in the gallery they also reworked aspects of the choreographic structure in response to this new context. Their space at the Bargehouse has a sense of an openness and expansiveness with large windows letting in light and a sense of the world beyond. While in the peeling paint and rough surfaces of the walls, the past has left its tangible imprint. Sharp also collected sounds from the dancers and the site that are added to the installation further contributing to the ways in which past and present seem to coalesce in the viscosity of inhabited space. In this context the dancers found some of the subtle plays between movement and sound failed to impress into the space as they had in the studio. However, in the different environment Montes' whistling gains a haunting, lost, quality that adds to a sense of dislocation. As they continued to work into the space, not only in rehearsal but during the performances, the dance gained a life within the gallery setting. The dancers' experience of working in the installation not only informed conscious decisions to make small changes but informed intercorporeal responses in performance.

LandMark makes no pretence at presenting a unified shared vision but rather interconnected fragments that attest to both the long standing working relationships between the artistsⁱⁱⁱ and their generosity in allowing each other creative space. Some of the audience perhaps struggle in this environment, but others are able to engage on their own terms, perhaps flicking through a book and then pausing to watch the dancers before continuing. Sharp who is present throughout, making minute adjustments to the sound in response to activity in the space, notices a distinction between those who respond corporeally to the environment and those who remain detached observers. The dancers too, have noticed how the presence of the spectators changes their experience of the space and their actions within it. Within the planned structures of the performance, improvised changes take place during which the dancers maintain a sense of direct interaction, not only with each other but also with the changing context of each performance. They sense when a number of people are focussed on their actions, even recognising that certain sections can become quite 'theatrical' in response. At other times, when they feel the spectators are disengaged, they work hard to retain a focus on their actions and to stay connected to the work (Saxon, Montes and Sharp, in conversation with the author, 11th September, 2011).

The experience of dancers in response to spectators has often been explored in relation to the power of the gaze which objectifies the person being looked at. Much dance theory has taken to heart Laura Mulvey's account of the male gaze in which 'pleasure in looking has

been split between active/male and passive/female' (1975, section III). However, it has been suggested by Ann Cooper Albright (1999, 15) that not all dance positions the performers in this manner. Merleau-Ponty's theorisation of the interrelatedness of self-other-world might account for those times in a live interaction between performers and between performers and spectator when those present are able to contribute to a sense of a shared realm so that, in some sense, all those present collaborate in the event.

Merleau-Ponty challenged the 'assumptions that put the body in the world and the seer in the body'(1968,138) to develop a concept of thought as part of a 'flesh' that is not matter but:

... the coiling over of the visible upon the seeing body, of the tangible upon the touching bodythis pact between them and me according to which I lend them my body in order that they inscribe upon it and give me their resemblance, this fold, this central cavity of the visible which is my vision, these two mirror arguments of the seeing and the visible, the touching and the touched, form a close bond system that I count on, define a vision in general and a constant style of visibility from which I cannot detach myself.'

There are parallels between Merleau-Ponty's philosophical explorations of the reciprocal relationship between consciousness-world and more recent research that draws on the findings of contemporary neuroscience to suggest how it is necessary to develop a way of thinking about the neural bases of perception and action that does not rest on the assumption that the brain is the seat of consciousness.^{iv} Particularly pertinent in this context is Alva Noë and Kevin O' Regan's suggestion of how (in contrast to traditional models of visual representation) the outside world acts as an 'external memory' (Noe and O'Regan, 2001). Such a concept may provide for what is an extraordinary moment in *LandMark* when Saxon seems to search around her own body to pull out a small object from a pocket: inspecting it quizzically she seems to be trying to recall its significance in her world. Here in a short, simple action the dancer suggests the enormity of that sense of lack when the lived connection to the world, and hence the memories contained within a sphere of experience, is lost.

Merleau Ponty's refusal to maintain the distinction between subject and object has been acknowledged from beyond the realms of existential phenomenology^v even though more recent acknowledgement of 'difference' makes intercorporeal experience more complex than he perhaps envisaged.^{vi} For Merleau-Ponty, within a reciprocal 'inscription of the touching in the visible , of the seeing in the tangible' there is ' a propagation of these exchanges to all bodies of the same type and of the same style' which for Merleau-Ponty 'founds transitivity from one body to another' (1968, 143). In a contemporary context, questions surrounding just what bodies 'are of the same type' suggests the frailty of the

interconnectedness that Merleau-Ponty sought to understand, and it is this fragile quality of a shared domain that *LandMark* may be felt to evoke.

The complexity of the relationship between self-world that Merleau-Ponty interrogates, may also be thought of as being at the heart of an ecological aesthetics as proposed by Paul Crowther (1993). Drawing on the phenomenology of Merleau-Ponty, Crowther has developed an aesthetic theory that foregrounds human embodiment in the context of continual reciprocal interactions.^{vii} On Crowther's terms the artist, or in the case of collaborative works, artists, being caught up in a web of reciprocal relationships ensures that the work embodies more than the purely individual beings of the artists. Further, to appreciate art is itself an embodied act. In relation to live performance, recognition of what Crowther terms the reciprocity of the subject-object relationship may lead to reflection on the embodied acts of both performers and audience as dependent on an intercorporeal realm that is culturally enmeshed. Crowther makes explicit the difficulties in sharing agreement with regard to experiences of art but argues for the importance of trying to understand what others value. In terms of dance this might suggest that audiences approach performance in a manner that attempts to engage with the world as lived by the performers. Moreover, it may be argued that the performers equally respond to their sense of the audience.

This relationship between performer and audience may be understood in the terms the philosopher Kym Maclaren (2002) uses to describe what, for her, are the implications of Merleau-Ponty's later work for interpersonal interactions in a general social context. She brings to attention the sense in which through intercorporeal engagement with others, people can experience different styles of being.^{viii} She then moves on to explore the complex play of intercorporeality and intersubjectivity that allows for what she describes as the capacity for 'letting others be' (Maclaren, 2002, 192). What she pays attention to is how often, rather than a condition of 'free play' between people where each trusts how they are situated in relation to one another, one person may feel they have been positioned in a manner that is not comfortable for them (Maclaren, 2002, 192). This then may lead to a site of struggle but, Maclaren shows how this experience need not necessarily be negative as it is through such processes that people undergo a transformation into other styles of being. This conceptual approach to the self-other relationship may be applied to the arena of performance to explore what occurs in a successful engagement between performer and audience. Moreover, in successful collaborations the artists may also need to work at how 'to let others be.'

In *LandMark* the artists, through digging into the very fabric of their shared world, reveal the difficulties and inconsistencies that are part of it. In a context in which a sense of a stable shared world cannot be taken for granted, *LandMark* makes evident the frailty of that which binds experience together. As a collaboration it is the product of mature artists who

have a sensitivity to one another that allows them 'to let others be' and that poses a challenge to those audience members who might prefer to gaze at the dance as a clearly defined object rather than to enter into an embodied reciprocal interaction with the world of the work.

Citations

Butler, J. (2008) Sexual Difference as a Question of Ethics: Alterities of the Flesh in Irigaray and Merleau-Ponty, *Chiasmi International*, Vol.10, 333-347.

Butler, J. (2004) Merleau-Ponty and the Touch of Malebranche in T. Carman and M. Hansen (Eds.) *The Cambridge Companion to Merleau-Ponty*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Crowther, P. (1993) *Art and Embodiment*, Oxford: Clarendon Press.

Maclaren, Kym (2002) Intercorporeality, Intersubjectivity and the Problem of "Letting Others Be, Figures and Grounds of the Flesh, *Chiasmi International*, Vol. 4, 187-208.

Merleau-Ponty, M. (1968) *The Visible and The Invisible*, Evanston: Northwestern University.

Mulvey, L. (1975) Visual Pleasure and Narrative Cinema, *Screen*, Vol.16, No. 3 (Autumn), 6-18.

O' Regan, J and Noë, A (2001) A Sensorimotor Account of Vision and Visual Consciousness, *Behavioural and Brain Sciences* Vol. 24, 939-1031.

Pantiledes, K. (2011) 'Siobhan Davies Commissions at Barge House', londondance.com, (Wednesday 9th November) Accessed 11, November, 2011.

Rowell, B. (2009) Dance Analysis in a Postmodern Age: Integrating Theory and Practice, in J. Butterworth and L. Wildschut, (Eds.) *Contemporary Choreography: A Critical Reader*, London; New York: Routledge, 136-151.

ⁱ Both dancers' skill in performance means that they are able to make the audience aware that their actions relate to bodily feeling in order to communicate the connection (and disconnection) of their movement to visceral sensation

ⁱⁱ They perform together in the work of Siobhan Davies and in their own choreographies.

ⁱⁱⁱ Sharp has worked on a number of previous projects with the dancers.

^{iv} Rather the philosopher Alva Noë, working alongside the scientist and psychologist J. Kevin O' Regan, suggests that vision is 'a skilful mode of encounter with the environment' (2001, 959). In their accounts of these encounters there are similarities with Merleau Ponty's approach to the embodied acts of seeing and touching.

^v For example, Judith Butler recognises the significance of his 'radical challenge to a subject centred intentionality' (Butler, 2008, 345).

^{vi} In particular Merleau-Ponty has been criticised for not recognising the importance of gender difference. See Judith Butler's (2008) discussion of Luce Irigaray's criticism.

^{vii} 'The artwork... reflects our mode of embodied inherence in the world...' (Crowther, 1993,) NB Crowther does not relate his theory to dance but his work has been developed upon in relation to this filed by Bonnie Rowell (2009) who further explores how ideas may be perceived as embodied in dance, pointing out some of the complexities of an artform that relies on human embodiment.

^{viii} However, Maclaren is careful here to explore the arena of 'indistinction between two bodies' (192 drawing on Merleau-Ponty's notion of *écart* which she describes as being 'there' in the actions of the others and at the same time 'here' following them.