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TEXT AND THE DANCING BODY IN THE WORK OF ROSE ENGLISH AND LAURIE ANDERSON: THE DIVA OF PERFORMANCE ART AND THE TECHNO ICE-QUEEN

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This paper is an analysis of the practise of two contemporary women performance artists who use written texts in relation to the dancing body; Rose English and Laurie Anderson. I will be focussing on English's *The Double Wedding* (English; 1991) and Anderson's *Home of the Brave* (Anderson: 1986). My thesis is that the uses of written text in relation to the dancing body, in the practise of these two women, enables their work to develop meanings that are more difficult to articulate within practise that does not question its own disciplinarity. Both of these women are engaged in interdisciplinary art practise, although this is importantly different in process and production. I will be seeking to describe the dancing body as an integral part of both these women's practise, and to argue for an analysis of written/spoken text that imbricates the dancing body in verbal discourse, and shifts the range of possible meanings.

The Double Wedding is a quest for the double wedding of its own title. It is already a doubling of pairs before the performance begins; a doubling of closures. As a title, it appears simple, direct, and one implicitly expects there to 'be' what it announces. But there is no 'double wedding' beyond the attempt to retrieve it. In repeated reminiscences, frequently verging on the nostalgic, the cast try to summon some aspect of this originary double wedding, yet everyone remembers it differently, forgets parts, speaks of different versions. The loss of a single coherent, locatable meaning, and the endless hope for its retrieval, has marked some of the most important twentieth century theoretical work. For Derrida such a meaning was the 'transcendental signified', the still figuring of full meaning, and meaning in language was always the antithesis of the achievement of this; endless play, deferral, disruption[1]. For psychoanalysis, and for Lacan in particular, the loss of coherent, locatable meaning is a characteristic of the psychic subject herself, who is always split, and yearning for the loss of originary oneness (the semiotic/the Real)[2]. In *The Double Wedding*, transparent truth is marked as an illusion, and mirrors this search for identity—which is always incomplete. Truth feigns presence—is a bad actor. English stages *The Double Wedding* as 'theatre,' self-consciously revelling in its conventions of mimesis. By doing so, English places these questions over the nature of meaning within a practise which has a troubled relationship to the real/Real (transparent/objective reality and Lacan's notion of Full Being). Mimesis describes a version of performance which distinguishes the actor from her role/the original from the staged fiction. In *The Double Wedding*, English blurs these distinctions, as well as foregrounding them. In her opening monologue, English promises "To take (us) beyond belief" (English 1991; 3) This is the language of the ringmaster whipping up awe; the hyperbole of music hall, but we are already beyond belief—there is no artifice here that does not want to reveal itself as well as seduce us. The slips and starts and forgettings in *The Double Wedding*, are not 'really' so, but are written and rehearsed as this, and only 'pretend' to be 'real,' participate in the conventions of theatre at the same time as disturbing them.

The Double Wedding is a performance filled with doubles; there are two hypnotists, two cameramen, two members of the Fake Adagio, two nebulae, two viscera, and two members of the True Adagio. I am interested here in the parallel pairs that make up the Fake and the True Adagio. English purposely uses the term 'adagio' which

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refers to a slow, often lyrical dance, usually between a man and a woman, and often including spectacular lifts, as the hinge for her naming of these pairs. The Fake Adagio are involved in endless discussion, about the nature of their dance. At different points, neither of them are quite sure they are even in the show at all. They talk much more about dance than they actually dance. The True Adagio, in contrast, simply present their ice dance. Situated at the finale of the performance, the True Adagio, perform a stunning duet on a circle of ice. This pair are 'really' Olympic ice-skaters; Paul Askham and Sharon Jones, they never speak, are named as 'True,' and, so the implication goes, are somehow originary. The Fake Adagio, in contrast, don't quite make it; they are disruptive, frequently make false starts, get depressed and fail to appear. The irony here is that The Fake Adagio are both 'really' dancers; Nigel Charnock and Wendy Houston. Both Charnock and Houston have worked extensively with DV8[3], and Charnock in particular is well-known both as an accomplished dancer, and for the extremes of physicality in his own work and in his work with DV8.[4] English wryly refers to this when she introduces him within *The Double Wedding* as 'overenthusiastic.' "He is overenthusiastic," she says, "but it is just an act." (English 1991; 5) 'Really,' English suggests, Charnock feigns extreme physicality, it is a frippery, a mask. *Real* exhaustion, *real* risk, the catching of flying bodies, repeated falls; English cunningly places this practice in the realm of theatrical convention, where characters ask each other "Were you really writing then, or pretending to write?" (English 1991:18), and whole casts use glittery pipes they never light.

The following speech is spoken by Charnock at the end of Act One, as English passingly refers to The Fake Adagio as "re-creating the great adage from the original production" (English 1991; 37), in fact half of this adagio (Charnock) is obsessing about dance discourse, whilst his partner (Houston) continually falls asleep;

> *The Fake Adagio/The Dew*
> It's not just that I'm tired of dancing. It's not just that I'm physically tired. It's that I'm mentally exhausted. I've been thinking about dance so much recently that I've worn myself out. I'm tired of talking about dancing. I'm tired of watching dancing. I'm tired of dancing dancing. I'm tired of reading about dancing. I'm tired of listening to dance. I'm tired of anticipating a dance. I'm tired of the after effects of a dance, the residue. I'm tired of the preparation to dance. I'm tired by the lack of preparation. I'm tired, I'm exhausted by my own stamina! The thought of my own energy wears me out! Even the idea of recovering from my dance fatigues me. I feel mortified! Mortified by my own exhaustion!
>
> (English 1991; 38)

Here the crisis is that an overload of verbal discourse on the dance has somehow cancelled out the possibility of the dance itself and yet we know this is a dancer who speaks this; we know he dances, even as he verbally refuses this here. It is as if, all this chatter is 'too much,' overwhelms the dance. Having said this, I do not think that English is arguing for silent, unthinking dance, rather she draws attention to the disciplinary demands we place on art practise. English disturbs the borders we keep dear, even as we dismantle them. Charnock recently ventured into television, playing a character dying of Aids in *Closing Numbers*.[5] One might assume that participating in TV realism would be a less physical option, than Charnock's usual performance work, and yet Charnock had to diet radically to achieve the body of someone about to die of AIDS. Mimesis cutting into flesh. English's performance always wants to reveal as well as seduce, television realism is only interested in seduction; wants us to confuse this sign of a dying fragile body with one that is 'really' dying. This is a strange feigning, but

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perhaps only if one knows of Charnock's astounding strength, else we are seduced.

Charnock's partner, Wendy Houston, has a different relationship to the real/Real in *The Double Wedding*. Whilst Nigel talks and talks, she slips into sleep, although this is, no-doubt, feigned sleep. Here, not only does she not speak, but she does not even figure in consciousness. Houston is both inside a structure of conscious discourse (*The Double Wedding* itself) and outside of it, (as a character sleeping, and configured as Woman, who always cannot be seen or heard within the marked Symbolic Order). Towards the end of *The Double Wedding*, in the Lido scene, Houston enters as a showgirl, high-kicking between sentences, in a parody of Buzby Berkeley extravaganzas. When English demands to see the whole Lido Scene again, everything runs smoothly, except that Houston fails to appear, and the row of characters (including Charnock) gesture endlessly in their white suits, towards the place of her expected entrance. Peggy Phelan in her landmark work *Unmarked* (Phelan 1993), says; "(w)ithin the realm of the visible, that is both the realm of the signifier and the image, women are seen always as Other; thus, *The Woman* cannot be seen. Yet, like a ubiquitous ghost, she continues to haunt the images we believe in, the ones we remember seeing and loving" (Phelan 1993: 6) Phelan argues for such 'active vanishing' as a means of achieving political power, and here English plays on these ideas by linking the theatricality of the missed entrance, with the impossibility for women to 'enter' an economy of the visible in their own right at all; *The Woman* has always already missed her entrance.

In a show which is bursting with doubles, a character called The Figment is conspicuously without a partner. The seduction of traditional narratives from pantomime to Hollywood film, to classical ballet suggest that his partner is Rose, the central harridan, who is also without a partner, but sustains such a central role in the performance that her lack of a pair is less conspicuous. She also introduces herself at the beginning as "alone, totally alone, but in the company of consorts" (English 1991; 2). The Figment is a curious kind of hero. He has long hair, wears black tights and dances on black pointe. His 'part' in the production is always deferred; "The seventh person to appear in this story is the figment" says Rose "...(h)e is elusive and evasive but comes into his own in the second act when he makes himself known to me," (English 1991; 6). Even his name links him with fabrication, with something made-up, or pretended. As the last character to be hypnotised by Rose at the beginning of Act One, The Figment says that his 'part' in *The Double Wedding* "...involved a lot of dancing which was much more my cup of tea... It was as if we were doing it at the same time as we were thinking it." (English 1991:15). Such a description of the experience of dancing, elides the processes of choreography and rehearsal and shifts the dance into a 'pure' expression of thinking; as if this were the originary dance, the re-call to a dance that was 'complete' expression. At the beginning of Act Two, The Figment dances with the two Viscera, who dance ballet, and are well-skilled. Once the Viscera stop, The Figment continues with a solo. On pointe and using the vocabulary of the ballerina, the effect is more than a little humorous. He stops the dance, and says immediately; " So. Rose, how's it going" (English 1991; 42). This colloquialism after dancing ballet, gestures towards the closed nature of certain traditional art practices, such as classical ballet. Such that to speak at all would be quite radical, but to speak such chatty colloquialisms to the heroine, combines elite and vernacular cultures in the body of one performer, a characteristic of postmodernism. Rose has a hero in her show, but he's almost not there, looks ridiculous, and doesn't know his discipline when he dances it.

The two female ballet dancers referred to as The Viscera, parallel the two acrobats known as The Nebulae. These are another doubling of pairs, and are conspicuous in their displays of skill, performed by non-speaking bodies. English names them in oddly contrasting ways, 'viscera' referring to the intestines, 'nebulae' to a diffuse mass of interstellar dust or gas. Both are nouns of words commonly used as adjectives,

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visceral meaning 'affecting the viscera', or 'intensely emotional', and *nebulous* meaning 'lacking definite form or limits/unclearly established.' These namings are placed at the opposite ends of vigorous presence; one 'in the guts' and the other so diffuse its presence is vague and unclear. That both these pairs are skilled physical practitioners makes these namings all the more curious. That the ballerinas are 'The Viscera' may be some wry comment on the roles available to women within classical ballet. Such a project involves achieving tininess and lightness, through years of rigorous training, and physical pain. The dancing of The Viscera is light, sweet, and pretty—it does not *look* gutsy, but its achievement required guts. The Nebulae on the other hand, are far from light and sweet and pretty. Their arching spinning bodies reveal their physical training in a way that classical ballet seeks to conceal it. Additionally, classical ballet is usually closed within a narrative structure, and though there are physical feats, the seduction is that these are part of a particular 'role', and its expression. In circus or cabaret, feats are themselves revealed as the focus of the performance. Both forms are altered irrevocably by being imbricated in the Rose English text. Both are unmarked by spoken text in a performance noisy with verbal play.

English ends Act One with a monologue in which she says, "...you just have to be tremendously tenacious and hang on for dear life in the face of fiction. " (English 199 1: 41) After she says this, one of the nebulae flies in, hanging by her teeth and spinning from a 'sanga bisz.' In this context of staged interrogations, we are primed to ask questions ("...you get what you interrogate for" [Phelan 1993; 125]); the shifting of boundaries shifts the resonance of this woman's silent spinning. Unmarked by spoken discourse, her spinning body drills a fissure in the arguments over the nature of the real/ Real. She is 'really' hanging from her clenched mouth, like a circus version of Wonderwoman, she spins unbearably, hangs on (literally) for dear life. Not only does this spinning woman remain unmarked by written/spoken text, but the very act (and it is 'an act') of suspending her body weight from her clenched teeth, means that there is no room for speaking. Quite literally, a metal plug is in her mouth; she clasps her teeth around it. Her open mouth would end the spectacle. This is a marvellous and uncomfortable juxtaposition of discourses. Her body achieves the implied perfection of ballet, and does not touch the ground at all, but the effort of transcending the stage floor means that she cannot speak, is mute in the face of fiction.

* * *

I think of Laurie Anderson's mouth, and of the nature of fiction. Three things. A close-up of her face with dark glasses obscuring her eyes, clenched fists beating her head, as she beats the sound is amplified, at the end she opens her mouth and snaps her teeth shut several times—it echoes. A grin from *Kokoku*, teeth clenched, a light in her mouth that shines through her teeth. An absent mouth from the video of *Sharkey's Day*; a thin circle with nothing inside it, a triangle shape for her nose and two buttons for eyes. I think of the spinning nebula, gritting her teeth to spin freely. But these mouths here underscore rather than obscure the possibility of speaking, even as the possibility of full speech eludes them. They are used as epilogues/wry comments on spoken text/as costume. Anderson's performing body seems porous; light and sound rush through it, video techniques erase it, but she always has agency, is at the centre of all her performances and transforms her body as a site from which to speak, make sound, dance, as a place where the body and technology itself are sometimes confused.

Anderson's dancing body opens her film *Home of the Brave*.[6] Her body in silhouette moves wildly, to a regular funky beat. She plays on her own two-dimensionality; in wide seconds, she swoops, wriggles, presents her palms to us, finds right angles at

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knees and elbows. In front of 30 foot of blue glow, Anderson's body dances like a shadow- marionette. As she dances, the title of the piece HOME OF THE BRAVE appears high on this screen in square upper-case. This small body, this vast screen, this regular beat and these words invoke an epic beginning. Here technology is smooth, wants to conceal its own complexity. As Anderson draws the bow across her violin, so lights draw up and reveal her wearing a lycra face mask. When she speaks it is through the vocoder which lowers her voice an octave. This female body is effaced first by shadowing, then by mask and subsequently by altered voice. The effect of these layers of concealment is a curious kind of drag, not quite masculine, certainly not feminine, she becomes a kind of friendly 'creature.' Moving further downstage, Anderson begins a sort of techno-prologue, in which she introduces the numbers 'one' and 'zero' to her audience. This meditation combines comments on the colloquial references of being 'number one', with versions of lyrics in digitalised series of ones and zeros. This combination mirrors the mixtures of signs resonant in the body of this woman; the confusion of technology with this woman's body. Here, Anderson appears to share English's delight in dressing up, but whereas English in *The Double Wedding* froths up her staged showgirl femininity, wears big heels, shining silver and carries a wand. Anderson wears only a white suit, and the tight mask, and speaks in baritone. Technology, not sequins construct this body, and its wires, modems and obsessive digitalising are concealed, and revealed by Anderson.

What I am interested in here is the ways in which Anderson imbricates the body in her spoken and sung text. Jessica Prinz[7] argues that Anderson's shifting of voices in her texts, and vocal range via the vocoder, undermines the hegemony of any one position. This is an important point, but I do not think that Anderson's shifting subject position is ever easily locatable as masculine/feminine, or visual/verbal. The altered voice which Anderson herself refers to as 'the voice of authority' is itself constructed by technology, in the same way that her performing body is, and these are the same concerns that haunt her texts; the ordinary body in the face of technical overload. Anderson's work is a more troubling metonymy than Prinz would argue. Perhaps one of the reasons for this is Anderson's use of simple text, and branded colloquialisms, cliches that bore us, and haunt us with their loneliness and familiarity. This branded nature of capitalist culture extends to gesture as well as text. At the end of *Kokoku*, Anderson's text finishes with:

> We're so pretty,
> Shake our hands,
> Shake our heads,
> Shake our feet.
>
> We're so fine
> The ways we live
> The way we shake.
> We're so nice.[8]

As Anderson finishes saying this, the sibilant at the end of 'nice' forms into a grin with clenched teeth, and a light inside her mouth makes her teeth glow. The stage lights slide to blackout, such that this red grin hangs in the darkness, with the word 'nice'. Such a vocal and visual gesture is double-edged; reminds us of endless commodities, and of a lost imagined time when nice meant 'nice'. The inside of this performing body glows. Technology is coming, it seems to say—*'Nice'*.

Laurie Anderson and Rose English might seem like vastly different performance artists; the diva of performance art and the techno ice-queen, but their involvement in

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the construction of meaning via performance, shares a similar project; an on-going refusal of closure, and of traditional author-ity.

The whole of *The Double Wedding* is a play between the presence of the multiple signifiers that make up the chatter of retrieval, and the absence of a retrievable core. This is true for meaning at the level of the sentence (according to Derrida) as well as at the level of the playtext. The traditional view of the author as the source of meaning, casts the author herself in the role of transcendental signified. Such an author is here staged: English stands beyond 6 foot, glimmering in her silver frock. This author strives for profound and full presence, by being *here*, visceral, seductive, gorgeous and hilarious before us, and this makes her lack of author-ity even more profound. This is clever, for all its play at accident and mistake. English stands before us, gesturing at every cliche of passionate presence, and yet she and her whole performance signify absence, lack, loss. *The Double Wedding* signifies closure, closure intensified, and yet in the unfolding of its performance, it is only endless deferral; at its 'end' everyone promises not to marry each other.

Anderson achieves a similar open-endedness, this time not by masquerading at full presence, and the search for it, but by gesturing only at fragments. Anderson's texts are monologic; all verbal discourse is sited in this one female body. In this work the most prominent presence besides Anderson herself is the free play of technology—of projected image/slides/film/animation, and of sound—synthesiser, violin, synclavier, or the alteration of her voice by the vocoder, and Anderson is not always distinguishable from this equipment. These elements achieve a free-play of signifiers. Free because there is little attempt at semantic closure. Meaning is gestured towards, tonal, unsettling, not demanded, pointed at and expected. In Anderson's work there is no striving towards a central kernel of meaning. It is as if she quietly acknowledges the futility of such a project. The play of simple language, uneasy use of visual and verbal cliche, clash in us who recognise them and fail to recognise ourselves. 'HELLO', 'WE ARE EXPERIENCING DIFFICULTIES', 'ACTUAL SIZE' rush towards us on Anderson's screen. Here absence is multiple; a repeated haunting Her role as author is problematised by her shifting narrative position, her range of voices. If we presume she is the source of meaning then we are quickly un-done. Here there are dialogues, hanging sentences, voices that speak as low as men do Where is her author-ity?

* * *

I sit with Robert in New York. Grief sleeps in his face, as if he had been made up to look older. This was my father, he said. He tells me about Laurie and about working with her. He tells me that she's really happy with Lou Reed, who told her father when he met him that he was more famous than her. Robert says it was the right thing to say. He calls me the next day and says "I spoke to Laurie today." Laurie and fathers seem to haunt me. At the Lincoln Centre, where I have learnt bureaucracy by heart, I overhear the pages repeating to newcomers; 'These stacks are closed'. I am given the wrong file by one of the pages, and inside is one small yellow newspaper clipping, which says "ACTRESS DIES AFTER 5-STORY LEAP, Miss Lauri Anderson, twenty-three years old, of 115 East Eighty-sixth Street, died in Mt. Sinai Hospital early yesterday morning of injuries which she received when she jumped from the window of a fifth-floor apartment...after appearing in musical comedies in New York, she obtained work as a stenographer." The clipping is dated Mar 25 1932. Over sixty years later, and another Laurie Anderson appears in musical comedies of her own making; sixty dollars a ticket and on Broadway. One woman and forty tons of equipment. I think of a photograph of an old man clutching a cat and smiling, and of a woman who jumped out of a window. Laurie Anderson eludes me; I try to fix her, lay out meanings, and still I

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leave town before she arrives. Rose English makes me tea, is kind to my nervous questioning; her enthusiasm curves its way inside her articulate sentences. These are the images I remember seeing and loving. This body right here tapping keys and speaking before you. Such dancing bodies as these shunted, cocooned and veiled by text. Peggy Phelan says; "What one can see is in every way related to what one can say" (Phelan 1993: 2) Anderson and English know this implicitly, delight in play and provocation and use the dancing/textual body to say what it is they see.

Notes

[1] For a good introduction to these concepts see; Bass, Alan, trans., 1978. *Writing and Difference*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press.

[2] For a good introduction to Lacan see; Lacan, Jacques, 1978. *The Four Fundamental Concepts of Psycho-Analysis*. New York & London, Norton.

[3] The following articles give an introduction to Nigel Charnock, Wendy Houston and their work with DV8; Constanti, Sophie, 1988. "Spring Loaded" *The Dancing Times* Mar pp. 535-536 / Constanti, Sophie, 1994. "Dance Umbrella '93" *The Dancing Times*, Jan p. 330 / Meisner, Nadine, 1990. "You must go on" *Dance and Dancers*. Oct pp. 18-19 / Peppiatt, Anthony, 1984. "Sickled Feet, Scrunched Shoulders and Sexual Stereotypes" *Dance Theatre Journal* v.2, no. 4 Winter pp. 8-10.

[4] Constanti describes Charnock as "an incurable masochist" (Constanti 1994: 330).

[5] *Closing Numbers* directed by David Cook, Film on Four 1993.

[6] There are important differences between live performance and film, and I do not intend to deal with these here, but nor do I wish to elide their significance. One of the criticisms of *Home of the Brave* was that it retained too much of the concert format, and failed to become truly 'a film', instead it mimiced a documentary style, with many shots framing the performance as if being seen from the audience These factors contributed to the critical failure of this film, but assists me in my analysis here.

[7] Prinz, Jessica. 1991 " 'Always two things switching' Anderson's Alterity" collected in *Art Discourse/Discourse in Art*. (Prinz 1991). Prinz argues that Anderson "sets up a continuous binary opposition that fluctuates between male and female without resolution and without priority...all discourses (male and female, verbal and visual) become 'other' or (alter) to each other in a way that undercuts and denies hegemony to any. Situating herself in this way 'between' the sexes and the arts, Anderson transgresses both the 'laws of genre' and gender" (Prinz 1991:135).

[8] 'Kokoku' from *Home of the Brave* (Anderson 1986).

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