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Girling Troubled Spaces: Choreography, Writing and BigEye

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Abstract: This article brings together Helene Cixous' theorisation of a transgressive writing practice with Deleuze and Guattari's radical re-conception of corporeality to discuss the implications, promises and failures of a digital/sonic/written/voiced choreographic practice. This piece is framed by the practice of half/angel, a performance company directed by Jools Gilson-Ellis and Richard Povall.

half/angel has been researching motion-sensing technologies and choreography/writing since 1996. This work has been undertaken during artists' residencies at STEIM (Studio for Electronic and Instrumental Musics), Amsterdam, The Netherlands (June, Sept. 1996), The Firkin Crane, Cork, Ireland (Oct. 1997) and The Banff Centre, Canada (April, Aug., Sept., 1998). Using software developed at STEIM (BigEye and LiSA), we work with the interaction of choreographies and soundscapes with a particular emphasis on the use of original text. These software applications enable a radical re-thinking of the body in physical and digital space.

BigEye is a relatively familiar software for those engaged in dance technology practices. The particularity of our research is in its use of written and uttered text in relation to choreographic practice. BigEye captures motion through a video camera, and the information can be used to trigger any midi file. We have spent a significant amount of our research time developing a performance practice which combines live vocal sound/speech amplified through a headset microphone, with sound/speech triggered through movement in the space. As our skills with both the software and its related choreographic practice have developed, we have designed environments which connect written texts (uttered in performance/recorded as samples/projected as image) with related choreographies. In pre-production residencies at Banff during 1998 we developed a series of pieces out of this practice. In 'Breath" we wanted to design an environment which was sensitive to subtle movements. Aurally, the piece combines amplified live breath, with sampled breaths, triggered by movement. In another piece, 'Five Small Girls', we wanted to experiment with a narrative thread and projected text. The environment is designed so that recorded/spoken text and projected text can be triggered in counterpoint to each other.

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five small girls in the town
stop their skipping
and clutch the blossoming red
between their legs
five small girls run to their mothers
in tears
one girl lying in the snow
bleeds ad begins to laugh
small muffled giggles at first
and then a rolling laughter
untroubled and sparkling

As I shift in space, sometimes I trigger aural fragments, and sometimes their visual counterparts, caught on a Perspex screen in front of me, falling on my body, and lost again on the wall behind me. I tangle text bodily. Ear to eye, flesh to screen, ink to font. What kind of writer does this make me?

In this article I want to bring together Helene Cixous' theorization of a transgressive writing practice with Deleuze and Guattari's radical re-conception of corporeality to discuss the implications, promises and failures of such a digital/sonic/written/voiced choreographic practice.

For Helene Cixous, writing is a revolutionary practice (Cixous 1981). One of the main reasons for this is its potential to undo binary structures. Writing is also powerfully corporeal for Cixous. The combination of these two gestures – the bodily undoing of binary opposition within writing results in a practice of fiction/theory concerned with destabilising narrative/lived subjectivity, and re-inscribing somatic experience.

Cixous' association with ecriture feminine may seem contradictory to a practice concerned with undoing the opposition feminine masculine.[1] For Cixous, however, ecriture feminine is /feminine/ in two senses. Firstly she believes women are presently closer to a feminine economy than men. Consequently she sees in women's writing both the possibility of including other experience and the subversion of existing structures. The relationship to the mother's body is also important in this context. For Cixous the rhythms and articulations of the maternal body continue to affect the subject into adult life, and this provides a connection to the pre-symbolic union between the self and m/other. The subject's relation to the self, the other

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language and the world is affected by this connection. Secondly, (according to Cixous) a feminine subject position is not constructed around mastery, and does not, therefore, appropriate the other's difference. Because of this, Cixous suggests that feminine writing will bring into being alternative forms of perception, relation and expression.

In relation to performance practice, it is Cixous' use of the feminine voice as a trope/referent within her fiction and theory that most interests me. This is not always a use of the term 'voice' as a metaphor for a writing practice. Feminine vocality also functions as an 'inspiration' in these texts, a lived/imagined experience 'to be brought' to such writing. Interestingly, the opposition between speaking and writing is one of the binaries Cixous lists at the beginning of 'Sorties' (Cixous & Clement 1986). How then, can an undoing of such opposition only be sought in writing itself? It is as if Cixous uses the extraordinary possibilities of the feminine voice to inscribe such vocality in her writing, but never approaches what the possibilities of using such writing to inscribe vocality in literal voices, might be.

In the following quotation from 'Sorties' Cixous weaves such a writing practice from vocal and textual femininity:

> *First I sense femininity in writing by: a privilege of voice: writing and voice are entwined and interwoven and writing's continuity/voice's rhythm take each other's breath away through interchanging, make the text gasp or form it out of suspenses and silences, make it lose its breath or rend it with cries.*
>
> (Cixous 'Sorties' in Cixous & Clement 1986: 92).

In this extract, writing and voice exchange breath and rhythm. Cixous writes of a text which has vocality – it gasps and cries. Yet I hear nothing. There is no body before me breathing into writing, moving rhythmically flesh to text. Cixous powerfully theorises and practices a feminine writing which calls up feminine vocality/corporeality. Implicitly Cixous' work invites the theorisation and practice of a 'performance feminine', a practice which inscribes the transgressive possibilities of writing within vocality/performance.[2] A site in which she can breath into text before me/beside me/inside me.

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Helene Cixous' radical textual practice has been enormously influential in re-thinking writing in relation to the body, and the female body in particular. Yet it is in performance that writing's ttansgressive possibilities might be choreographer/writer/performer has the potential to bring into being alternative forms of perception, relation and expression; a particular access to making "the text gasp … make it lose its breath or rent it with cries" (Cixous 'Sorties' in Cixous & Clement 1986: 92). With the addition of technology, this relation of physicality and vocality in choreography/performance can be textured in new ways, troubled into unlikely alliances; flesh to utterance to technology, and back again.

Most structures of contemporary performance training separate voice/text work from physical/choreographic work. Dancers, in my experience, often stumble at voice work, despite their articulate bodies. Yet it is precisely this detailed physical knowledge, which, with training, also makes them extraordinary performers of vocality. Such physical knowledge also brings something particular to digital technology. Perhaps our epistemologies are more likely to refuse a separation between the technologies that become our tools and our dancing/uttering bodies.

In the work of weaving bodies, utterance, sound and technology, it is the troublings of improvisational grazes that most profoundly recall Cixous' work. Her crying out for a plural writing, one marked with bodies and their voices[3] seems to me to lie here in the playful entanglement of digital technology and the voice/body/writing/sound. Here in the linear lines of theory, I must place my elements one after the other, in different orders divided by slashes, to evoke a sense of their mingling. There is much in performance which resists analysis, but we continue to try and articulate what happens in sweat and light. I too want to write a writing that will antagonise resistance. Theory is just another partner after a slash.

Air Canada is on strike. The Sample Cell and BigEye have not arrived from Ohio. It's Saturday, and I'm performing this evening. This is the first time I've performed without Richard setting up the environments. Nothing on the 8am bus, or the 9am. At 9.30 Bill walks into the studio with a grin on his face and a parcel in his hand. Scott and I set to work. It takes us all day, a move of studios and several borrowed lamps to get set. 'Chorda' is the last one. It's nearly 6 and the performance is at 8. We run the choreography and tweak the settings. My knowledge of the piece is a corporeal one. I know clearly how it feels to perform when the settings are right, but

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light levels, camera proximity, and what I'm wearing affect these settings. I try to guide Scott with my physical understanding of the piece, but I struggle for language- "it felt much richer" "it needs to have a clear threshold here that I can move beneath" "I need to be able to build up the layers more." Between us we weave a space for me to perform in conjured from the memory of flesh and the pressure of fingers on keys.

In this work, we make spaces for entanglement. These are precisely designed to be imprecise. Their textures are composed from choreographic fragments, made to conjure sound / text from its motion in particular ways. This practice demands that I am alive to every moment of performance; I weave with pools of choreography, utterance, and recorded text / sound. What I trigger with my motion affects what I say / sound / how I move again. Listening, speaking and moving become a related series of energies. I push at language to tell you what this is. In 'Lingua' I dance through two languages, one a language I trigger with my motion, and another which I speak. I graze one against the other. How I dance is composed from this relation of text to text, both of which are performed through my voice. One is recorded and triggered by my motion the other I speak in the liveness of performance. One is spoken in French, the other in English. Both give definitions and etymologies of the word 'secret.'[4] By using a headset microphone, I can voice intimately. How I voice (and both my live voice and my recorded voice are 'triggered by my body) is not a different thing to how I move. It is the same gesture.

secrecy *n. condition of being secret.*

secret *adj. About 1378, hidden, concealed, private, learned borrowing from Latin, and borrowed into English from Latin secretus set apart, withdrawn, hidden, originally past participle of secrenere to set apart.*
An earlier form secre, with the meaning of a prayer said in a low voice, found in Middle English about 1300, borrowed from Old French secre, variant of secret, secret. n.

also rarely of time

also rarely of movement

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The movement of air in bodies variously occluded to produce sound, is not profoundly different to the movement of information within digital technologies. Exchanges between these two (the uttering body and technology) is not a radical conceptual leap, especially if the relation between writing, utterance and physicality is already one of connective follow and intensities. Perhaps the most productive body of theory in relation to these idea is Deleuze and Guattari's 'assemblages' in which one element is never dominant over another, but are combined in terms of energies, processes, durations, corporeal substances and incorporeal events (Deleuze and Guattari 1987).

Elizabeth Grosz suggests that Deleuze and Guattari's re-conception of corporeality in these terms is key to re-thinking bodies:
They provide an altogether different way of understanding the body in its connection with other bodies, both human and non-human, animate and inanimate, linking organs and biological processes to material objects and social practices … the body is … understood more in terms of what it can do, the things it can perform, the linkages it establishes, the transformations and becomings it undergoes, and the machinic connections it forms with other bodies … In place of plenitude, being, fullness or self-identity is not lack, absence, rupture, but rather becoming (Grosz 1994: 165).

Such 'becoming' is a productive way of thinking what happens in the physical – vocal – digital performance I am interested in here; a processual matrix, in which the performer, her writing, her live voice, her recorded voice, the digital tools, the programmer and composer comprise a webbed series of liaisons, which shift and mark each other with durational pulses. Such liaisons are;

> *composed of lines, movements, speeds, and intensities, rather than of things and their relations. Assemblages or multiplicities, then because they are essentially in the consequences of a practice*
>
> (Grosz 1994: 167).

Just as I have argued that vocality and physicality are deeply imbricated practices, and that technology is best thought and practiced with a similar gesture of involvement, so too, I believe, theory – the thinking and writing of these practices necessarily joins in on a multiplicity – an assemblage "essentially in movement, in action." I dance with theory, and theory dances me; and my grammar fails.

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Thinking corporeality in discourse has pressing implications for a choreographic practice which involves bodies which write, dance and speak. Cartesian dualisms of mind and body (read writing and dancing), are simply not productive in relation to these practices. Women's troubled relationship to bodily symbolics means that she is positioned differently to men in these economics; her body has been represented / constructed as "frail, imperfect, unruly, unreliable" (Grosz 1994: 13) and is symbolically associated with the body in the mind / body pair. For femininity then, re-working such wary dualisms becomes a necessary tenet. In the trouble, mess and grubbiness of performance, with technology and theory as partners, such re-thinking, such thinking again seems to me to make possible the kinds of perception, relation and expression Cixous has so often cried out for, and femininity's unruliness is a twinkling skill for such a troubling.

fluidly then
(look down)
I moisten the space
between your
small fingers
and that
plate of buttons
south of you

corpuscle
to pixel

---

[1] Sometimes termed the 'other bisexuality' by Cixous, see 'Sorties' in Cixous & Clement 1986: 84-5

[2] Such a theorization is beyond the scope of this short paper, but I want to suggest that our practice has the textures of such a practice in its structures of negotiating text, choreography and sound.

[3] *The Laugh of the Medusa* (Cixous 1981) is Cixous' most well-known essay describing such a writing practice.

[4] The thematic organization of the piece around the notion of 'secret' arose initially out of our work with interactive technologies. In such work odd corporeal confusions arise between whether one moves in space or utters text. We are interested in what these new technologies conjure as 'secret', and how our other (Irish) secrets might bleed into such a performative

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tool. This shifting sense of the 'secret' as bodily / technological as well as cultural has continued to orient our thinking in the making of this work.

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