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## **'The Fifth Appendage': investigating the role of vision in solo improvisational dance training**

This article forms part of a larger practice-led investigation into the role of vision in solo, unaccompanied, un-scored improvisational dance performance. The principal aim of the paper is to propose and situate a mode of solo 'direct looking' that can be practised as a means of training for solo dances which are improvised in performance. This calibration of solo 'direct looking' as a pragmatic training tool for the generation of choreographic material is positioned and contextualized through analysis of the aesthetic and socio-cultural values of the global training/performance practice of Contact Improvisation and various articulations of 'direct looking' that have also developed in post-1960s Western solo/duet/ensemble dance training models - most specifically improvising teacher Al Wunder's definition of vision as 'the fifth appendage'. Examples are given of the ways in which the eyes can feed the imagination and the kinesthetic sense, leading to a channeling of corporeal impulse through spontaneous movement expression.

**Keywords: dance improvisation, solo, vision, kinesthesia, direct looking**

## Directing the Eyes In Space

To begin examining and interrogating the role and uses of vision within the context of solo improvisational dance training, I offer a description of an exemplary piece of solo improvisation grounded in a purposeful use of direct looking. It occurs in the film *The Usual Suspects* (Singer, 1995). Early in the film we see a detective borrow a colleague's office in order to interrogate a small-time criminal called Verbal Klint. The film's narrative unfolds through a series of episodes relayed by Klint, and involves the exploits of a fantastically terrifying crime lord, complete with unexplained deaths and inter-criminal machinations. When we first see Klint in this office, he is sitting silently, extremely composed, looking around him - his eyes linger on a cigarette box and they scan the back walls which are covered with pieces of paper. Early on in his interrogation he requests coffee and mentions, nonchalantly, that he was once in a barbershop quartet. At the end of the first interrogation scene we see him looking at the bottom of the detective's coffee cup. The camera focuses on his eyes.

In the next scene, Klint is still seated and we again become aware of his eye movements. Seemingly succumbing to interrogative pressure, he confesses the name of a key player in the criminal matrix - a lawyer, 'Kobayashi'. Not long after this there is another long, lingering shot on the bottom of the detective's coffee cups as he drinks. The plot accelerates and plays with our perceptions, though we don't know this at the time. Only retrospectively do we realize that the version of events we see, the version relayed through Klint's tale, is a sophisticated lie. What is dramatically revealed in the final three minutes of the film through the shocked and disbelieving eyes of the detective

is the suddenly obvious link between Klint's immediate environment and the details of his story.

As the detective's eyes begin to scan the notice board at the back of his colleague's office, they fall on a small sign - 'Quartet. Skokie, IL.' At the same time he remembers Klint talking inanely about once being in a barbershop quartet, in Skokie Illinois. Now the detective scans faster, half remembered pieces of dialogue suddenly cohering with what he is seeing; a random name on a list matches the name of one of the central crime figures of Klint's narrative; a picture matches a description he gave.

His coffee mug has fallen to the floor and smashed (the nicely cinematic mode of signaling his discovery of the truth). As we follow his eyes downwards, we see the inscription 'Kobayashi' on its broken base. The detective realizes that Klint's entire story has been concocted from a string of randomly placed words and images, suddenly visible to him in all their improvisatory significance.

Verbal Klint is, admittedly, a fictional improviser, but on the level of parable he captures very nicely the strategy of using vision as a means of establishing a compositionally minded connectivity with one's surroundings. In attending to the directionality and durational aspect of where he is looking - varying from a close-up lingering over the coffee cup to the longer reach and quick scanning of the noticeboard - Klint utilizes vision as the primary determinant of improvised composition; information from the eyes is prioritized over information from the other senses (such as, for example, his kinesthetic sense and the felt sensations that might arise from remaining seated in his chair,

adjusting only the directionality of the eyes and the positions of his head and torso). In composing very literally from and with what he sees, Klint also illustrates how using vision can seed compositional material that is specific to the idiosyncratic, constituent elements of the immediate environment - a direct compositional responsiveness that resonates, to borrow an improvisational maxim from improvising teacher/performer Ruth Zaporah, with 'the present-mindedness that is a basic component of improvisation' (Zaporah, 1995: 130).<sup>1</sup>

Klint is a useful reference point for this article's proposition that the eyes can be practiced/trained as initiators of material, but I will also discuss vision within the context of the entwinement of the senses; how the eyes feed the kinesthetic sense and influence the experiencing of motion factors of time, space, uses of weight and flow. Solo 'direct looking' within the context of dance training thus troubles the well-established hierarchy of the senses that predominates in Contact Improvisation - the most globally-practiced and documented mode of post-1960s experimental (US) improvisational dance training and performance - with its emphasis on peripheral or 'soft' vision and tactility. Further, it extends understandings and applications of forms of direct looking that are included in other improvisational dance training models by gearing vision very specifically around the exigencies of seeding and shaping compositional material.

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<sup>1</sup> American teacher and performer Ruth Zaporah was first introduced to movement improvisation in late 1960s Berkeley, California by Al Wunder. She has developed an improvisational training called Action Theatre, which treats improvisation as a hybrid, multi-modal form of expression, straddling the boundaries between text-based, movement-based and sound-based improvisations. Her approach is recounted in *Action Theater: The Improvisation of Presence* (Zaporah, 1995).

## **The Hierarchy of the Senses – Contact Improvisation and Peripheral Vision**

In Contact Improvisation peripheral or 'soft' vision, tactility and kinesthesia are prioritized as the sensory modes that instigate and ground the emergent movement.<sup>2</sup> Melinda Buckwalter (co-editor of *Contact Quarterly*, the journal primarily devoted to the form) talks of Contact Improvisation developing 'its own sense of space' based on 'the dialogue of weight shift and the play of reflexes activated in the constantly changing body orientation and falling that create the dance' (Buckwalter, 2010: 79). The improviser's attentiveness is attuned to 'the nuance of the shifting touch and weight of the partner', so the space around the duet 'is backgrounded in consciousness...less vital than the immediate dialogue of touch and kinesthetic receptors taking place through the enveloping skin and soft tissues' (Buckwalter, 2010: 79). The form can be incredibly dynamic to participate in (and to watch) as dancers organise themselves in what Steve Paxton calls 'spherical' space (Paxton, quoted by Buckwalter in Buckwalter, 2010: 79). Moving through a range of body

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<sup>2</sup> Contact Improvisation is widely credited as having been 'invented' by Steve Paxton in 1972. As part of a residency at Oberlin College in the United States, Paxton did a showing of some work he had been doing in a men's class. The showing was called 'Magnesium' and explored gravity and momentum

pathways and shapes, contact improvisers can spiral their bodies as they lift and fall, alternating active and passive shifts in their own weight. Contact Improvisation can cultivate and hone an (intensely) animated and purposeful corporeality, but the quality of somatic attentiveness born in and through this form is defined by the mobile interaction of two bodies sensing how to maintain contact and an ongoing exchange of support. It is the almost constant maintenance of touch between partners and a concomitant absence of direct looking either at their partner or at/into the space that is paramount. Cynthia Novack notes that skilled contact improvisers, for whom a sensing of weight has become 'almost second nature' 'tend more often to intentionally project their bodies into the surrounding space than beginners do' (Novack, 1990: 119) but, significantly, this outwardness is not initiated by vision and retaining an internal focus remains a core aesthetic and socio-cultural value of the form.

In this way, the form is ideologically aligned with some of the concerns of experimental dancers in the 1960s and through the 1970s and very specifically with their belief that an inward orientation was 'more natural' than an 'outward focus' (Novack, 1990: 135). An outward orientation 'was seen to indicate a major concern with pleasing an audience, with presenting an (artificial) image of oneself rather than the real, or authentic self' (Novack, 1990: 135) so contact improvisers concentrate on the sensations of moving -

this focus treated 'as a neutral value, a part of natural law rather than an aesthetic (cultural) overlay' (Novack, 1990: 68).<sup>3</sup>

There is a noticeable confluence between the technical demands of Contact Improvisation - the developed internal focus which facilitates the ability to sense shifts in weight (and keep its dancers safe) - and these ideological underpinnings in which the dancers of the 1960s and 1970s wanted to demonstrate their absorption in their work in order to differentiate themselves from 'any kind of presentational dancer' (Novack, 1990: 135). Any kind of direct visual engagement with one's partner (or, further, one's audience) was thus both generatively unnecessary and, historically, ideologically suspect. As the established form that the vast majority of dance improvisers encounter in either informal jams or structured courses (including tertiary degrees), it is not necessarily surprising, then, that Al Wunder muses that 'most dancers have developed a habit of taking in information primarily through peripheral vision' (Wunder, 2006: 154).

The correspondences between Contact Improvisation's global influence and popularity as a movement practice, its defining aesthetics and politics and the prevalence of peripheral vision as a (default) *modus operandi* in dance training, raises the question of how else the eyes might be used for improvisational dance. Before progressing onto an overview of some articulations of 'direct looking' that have developed in various post-60s

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<sup>3</sup> Contact improvisers also historically identified with 'signs of naturalism' like 'coughing, laughing, adjusting clothes' so that they could be seen as 'just another person' (Novack, 1990: 136).

Western improvisational dance training models in answer to this question, it is also worth briefly discussing training with eyes closed, a mode that cultivates an even more pronounced interiority by completely cutting out visual stimuli.

Daniel Nagrin, founder of the seminal American improvisational company The Workgroup (1971-74) stressed that 'all the sensitivities are honed' and a 'wider range of possibilities and images becomes accessible' when the eyes are shut. He writes of working with eyes shut as a route to becoming 'less self-conscious and freer - creatively'; it 'intensifies all the neglected senses and elicits a sense of danger and adventure' (Nagrin, 1994: 53). Similarly Anna Halprin - a key figure in the development of improvisation as a performance form in Western dance in the 1950s and known for her research into dance and the creative arts as in-roads to healing - begins many of her exercises with eyes shut. 'Keeping your eyes closed will intensify your awareness of your internal sensations' she says (Halprin, 2000: 50). American improviser Barbara Dilley includes Closed Eyes as part of her Five Eye Practices (discussed later), asking dancers to consider what it 'would it do to your awareness' and what it might do 'to the kind of movement choices that you had' (Stark Smith, 2005: 40).<sup>4</sup> There is further scope for exploring the ways in which working with closed eyes might have a specific impact on corporeal and dispositional qualities within duet and ensemble training contexts, but what I want to highlight here is that there is a developed and practiced correlation between working with closed vision and an inward

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<sup>4</sup> Dilley performed in some of the early Judson Dance Theatre pieces (1962-4) and later became a member of The Grand Union (1970-76).

orientation of the body - concentrated, potentially very dynamic in that concentration and somatically attentive. In my own solo training, deliberately absencing vision (whilst engaging in some warm-up stretches on the floor or for a period of time whilst dancing) facilitates a process of absorbing myself solely in the inclinations and impulses of my body, what my body wants to do with itself. Marked by a closing-off from an energetic relationality with the immediate spatial environment, my felt experience is that my other senses are 'intensified', amplified and stimulated. Following a period of working with closed eyes, however, my vision in turn is heightened ['open eyes and see shape, colour, detail' - author's studio note 9/6/12], so the mode can also operate as a useful warm-up or precursor to solo direct looking.

### **Direct Looking**

I turn now to understandings and applications of forms of 'direct looking' that have developed alongside but also in contradistinction to peripheral vision and closed eyes, in order to provide a context for the development of my own version of solo direct looking.

Useful summaries of the experiments of Barbara Dilley, Katie Duck, Lisa Nelson (discussed in more detail below), Nancy Topf, Nina Martin and Steve Paxton (as well as one non-American, Indonesian Suprpto Suryodarmo) are given in a chapter on 'The Eyes' in *Composing Whilst Dancing: An Improviser's Companion* - the only broad-based manual on improvisational practices to include a separate chapter on the eyes (see Buckwalter, 2010: 118-131). These treatments of vision consider various permutations of the eyes' relationship to movement in duet and ensemble improvisation practices,

with a common interest in bringing awareness to and challenging/augmenting improvisers' habitual use of peripheral or soft vision. Barbara Dilley, for instance, began her ensemble training programme 'Five Eye Practices' in order to encourage contemporary dancers to stop working with what she calls 'demi-opened' eyes, with a 'gaze (that) is almost closed' as they moved (Stark Smith, 2005: 39-41). Collectively, the Eye Practices are designed to serve as 'options to the habitual' when working as part of an ensemble (Buckwalter, 2010: 119) and Dilley includes 'Direct looking' as part of the optionality. She encourages her dancers to look at parts of their partners, such as 'the creases of their arm or the way they hold their hand' (Stark Smith, 2005: 40); indeed she asks them not to look at each other's eyes, but to concentrate on these other kinds of unusual focal points.<sup>5</sup>

Improviser Katie Duck also encourages her students to consider their eye habits and, contra Dilley, asks them to look each other directly in the eye, invoking what she calls 'biology' - a kind of hormonal rush - by 'eyeballing' each other and eliciting a sense of interpersonal interest and excitement (Buckwalter, 2010: 120).<sup>6</sup> This interpersonal chemistry also extends from training into performance, as Duck encourages her dancers to use their eyes to engage the audience on a 'gutsy, hormonal level' (Buckwalter, 2010: 121).

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<sup>5</sup> The other modes of Dilley's ensemble Eye Practices are 'Peripheral vision', 'Infant eyes' and 'Seeing the space between'. 'Infant eyes' is a 'returning to a childlike experience of looking at the world before naming, before judgement, before concept' (Stark Smith, 2005: 40). It is a kind of externally-directed vision but the dancer is not using the eyes to establish relationality or to treat what is seen as a stimulus to movement. In 'Seeing the space between', the dancer looks for the negative spaces 'between two people or between people and the walls and the floor' (Stark Smith, 2005: 40). Buckwalter reports that this 'becomes quite a kinetic and energising score for improvisation' within the ensemble context (Buckwalter, 2010: 119).

<sup>6</sup> Duck is a veteran improviser/teacher and founder of Amsterdam-based Magpie Music Dance Company.

In the case of Lisa Nelson (a long-time aficionado of Contact Improvisation and ongoing collaborator with Steve Paxton), it was a period of experimental solo work with video cameras that ultimately led to the creation of the 'Tuning Scores', an ensemble training methodology that examines links between observing and moving.<sup>7</sup> Treated as a kind of laboratory performance, the Tuning Scores are designed to make explicit the participants' aesthetic desires - what they see in a dance and what they want in a dance.<sup>8</sup>

Connections between observing, feeling and moving are verbalised by using a particular set of calls such as "pause," "replace," "reverse," "repeat," "sustain," allowing the improvisers to make ongoing adjustments to the emergent dance as a way of exploring their compositional and aesthetic desires (Buckwalter, 2010: 70).<sup>9</sup>

The precursor to the Tuning Scores was a period of solo exploration, in which Nelson discovered how the use of video 'magnified the sensations of looking' and made her aware of the movements that her body made to support her seeing (Nelson, 2004: 24). She also discovered how her 'visual desires reflexively prompted her own movement through space' (Buckwalter, 2010: 121) and this new-found awareness enabled her to explore the emergent 'dialogue' between her 'visual desires' and her physicality (Nelson, 2004: 24).

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<sup>7</sup> Lisa Nelson studied dance and choreography at Bennington College in Vermont and later worked with The Workgroup (1971-74). She teaches and performs throughout Europe.

<sup>8</sup> Throughout the 1990s an ensemble of improvisers called 'Image Lab' conducted a series of 'Observatories' in which audiences were invited to witness the way in which the process of 'tuning' operated as a mechanism for looking at dance and identifying aesthetic proclivities. A slightly more formal performative realisation of the score can be found in the duet *Go*, first created in 2001 by Nelson and Scott Smith. In this piece the Tuning Scores' calls are used to move and adjust the position of objects (Buckwalter, 2010: 144).

<sup>9</sup> See Benoit (1997: 67-82) and Buckwalter (2010: 121-125) for further accounts of The Tuning Scores.

Although much of this 'dialogue' was owed to the mechanics of moving about a space holding a camera to the eye, and the requisite adjustments she needed to make to the hold of her own body, Nelson also observed that 'I could feel my focus anchor me in the actual space beyond it, while what I was looking at funnelled deeply into my body, seeming literally to hold it up' (Nelson, 2004: 24). I note this discourse of interplay with one's environment - a visual focus that gives rise to a sense of somatic connectedness - because the language of 'funnelling into' echoes the dynamic of solo direct looking in my own training. It is the eyes reaching into space which in turn feeds internal sensation that is core, but in my proposition this kind of purposeful, directed vision is layered too with an attentiveness and receptivity to the ways in which what I see might gestate within my imagination and, through my kinesthetic sense and corporeal responsiveness, literally shape elements of my movement choices.

### **The Fifth Appendage**

I turn now to Wunder's notion of vision as 'the fifth appendage' in order to progress and develop the above training ideas into a consideration of the role that a 'direct looking' might play in seeding compositional material for solo, improvised dances.

Wunder studied and danced with Alwin Nikolais in New York in the 1960s before developing his own teaching and improvisation practice and moving to Melbourne, Australia in 1982. He classifies his work as a 'Theatre of the Ordinary', an appellation which points to an inherited interest in the 'recuperation of the ordinary' (Banes, 1993: 119) that can be traced back to

the aims of accessibility and egalitarianism infusing the artistic experiments of the American 1960s avant-garde dance and theatre improvisers.<sup>10</sup> In this vein, too, his work appeals to dancers, trained and non-trained, as much as to those whose primary interest is in improvising with words.

Wunder's description of vision as an 'appendage' relates to the way that he commences class with a physical warm-up, focused on what he calls 'primary movers' - any part of the body nominated as the main point of attention and stimulus to movement (Wunder, 2006: 62). Language, sounding and for some students song might emerge from this physical base but there is a prolonged initial concentration on working purely corporeally and one of the 'primary movers' may be the eyes.

Wunder has also developed a number of training exercises or scores that play with the use of vision as a means of becoming aware of the directional possibilities of the eyes in duet work, with a primary focus on the 'three ways of observing a partner' - direct looking, peripheral looking and 'unsighted' looking (Wunder, 2006: 154). An example of this kind of score from my early training in 2000 directs the students to either look directly at their partner (which includes the possibility of looking at a part of their body other than their eyes); away from their partner; utilize peripheral vision to make and maintain a connection or play a game of trying to 'look' at a partner who is behind them, out of (literal) sight [author's notes, 23/8/00]. Wunder links the

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<sup>10</sup> His pedagogical strategy consists of constructing an array of two or three sentence 'scores' that set some clear parameters for exploration but also give the students scope to pursue their own inclinations and discover and articulate their own stylistic proclivities within those parameters.

improviser's ability to shift between these different ways of looking at a partner with an increased ability to 'send and receive information' (Wunder, 2006: 154). Vision here is thus construed as an active and flexible mode of communicating and establishing relationality.

It is this ability to consciously shift the direction of the eyes that underpins Wunder's notion of vision as an 'appendage, as important as one's arms and legs in the use of communicating through physical movement' (Wunder, 2006: 153). In this context, I understand Wunder's use of 'appendage' as akin to a limb, a part of the body that can actively and expressively aim into and explore space and surroundings, although I am aware of the (probably unintentional) irony of using a term whose other primary dictionary meaning is as an additional, subordinate part of something else. It is clear from studying with him that Wunder does not consider vision to be a kind of add-on to other more significant training concerns. Indeed returning to practise with him in 2013, 13 years after first encountering his teaching methodology, Wunder again referred to vision as 'the fifth appendage' and part of his weeklong workshop was devoted to re-experiencing and re-investigating vision-based duet and ensemble scores.<sup>11</sup>

One duetting score, for instance, involved shifting between locomotive moving (travelling anywhere around the space), 'in place' moving (anything that does not travel) and stillness, whilst continually looking at one's partner (eye to eye, or any body part). Practising these simple but cleanly defined shifts in directionality of vision established an intimate connectivity between partners;

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<sup>11</sup> 'The Three V's', Tanzfabrik, Berlin, April 2-6 2013.

in part because eye-to-eye contact is, in Wunder's words, 'more human' than peripheral vision (Wunder, 2006: 154) and in part because choosing any other visual focus - a foot, the back of your partner's neck, a hand, a shoulder-blade - is in itself an unusual and intimate act, quite a quirky manifestation of curiosity and scrutiny. Layering a sense of timing and rhythm onto this score by maintaining a particular visual focus whilst your own and your partner's body moved and shifted in space or by playing with the timing of the swaps between looking directly at and away from your partner, reinforced the felt sense of communicative interplay. As well as cementing a working relationality between partners, semblances of story and character would also emerge simply from the direction, rhythm and timing of visual shifts.

These permutations of direct looking are excellent training tools for embedding relationality and responsiveness as operational principles in duet and ensemble work because, after Duck, there is a sense of 'interpersonal interest and excitement' in working with/alongside/in juxtaposition to/against one's partner. One's spatial, temporal, rhythmic and flow choices are made within the context of a vision-led duetting dynamic, leading to what I think of as an open and intentional corporeal quality in which vision and kinesthesia are experienced as actively interwoven (elaborated further below for the solo context).

### **Training Solo**

Understanding vision as a mode of active perception and as a means of informing and infusing kinesthetic experience and corporeal quality connects

with current cross-disciplinary interest in the interweaving of the senses - particularly in the field of 'kinesthetic empathy' and somatic practices.<sup>12</sup> Whilst acknowledging the 'interwoven ecologies' of the sensory network (Buckwalter, 2010: 144), conceiving of vision as an 'appendage' or limb specifically foregrounds the eyes as initiators of movement and creates, in my case, a number of inter-connected working ideas:

(1) The word 'appendage' is suggestive of motion and serves as a reminder that the eyes are motion-full, able to reach, camera-like, into space, alternating (discriminating) between close-up, medium or longer-reaches (2) Visual perception is an action - it is active and intentional - encouraging cognizance of the directionality of the eyes, ways in which the head might or might not follow eye movement and ways in which the eyes might lead the rest of the body in/through space. The word *intentional* supplies an additional clue and cue here, as it harks back etymologically to the Latin *intendus* - an aim, a stretching out - and *intendere* - to stretch forth (think too of the balletic *tendu*, from the French *tendre* - to stretch or extend). I also note that these significances attached to the word *intentional* parallel the interesting confluence of 'intention' and 'mental precision' in Frank Camilleri's accounts of the training processes of Swedish theatre maker Ingemar Lindh.<sup>13</sup> For Lindh, 'intention' is a composite of 'to tend towards' or 'to tend forward' and 'tension'

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<sup>12</sup> See Reynolds, Dee and Reason, Matthew. eds. (2012) and Foster, Susan (2011). This scholarship engages with James Jerome Gibson's seminal text, *The Senses Considered as Perceptual Systems* (1966).

<sup>13</sup> Lindh (1945-1997) adopted a form of collective improvisation as the organizing principle in the performance of theatre.

and it signifies both a mental inclination to do something and the physical manifestation of that inclination (Camilleri, 2008a: 251 & Camilleri, 2008b: 92).

(3) Proposing vision as active and intentional opens up choreographic possibilities for a) orienting oneself in relation to the space itself and b) using vision as a spur to imagistic associations, that, in turn - and moving beyond Klint here - might feed the kinesthetic sense, corporeal impulse and spontaneous movement expression (I give examples below).<sup>14</sup>

These working ideas collectively propose vision as a potential initiator of movement, as instrumental in cementing an active interplay with one's environment and as foundational in seeding a concomitant sense of somatic connectedness and embodiment.

### **Experienced Space**

Opening oneself to the space through one's vision brings an attitudinal flexibility and purposefulness to the solo improviser's occupation of space because responsiveness and relationality - allowing the space to palpably affect one's dancing, as if watching and taking instructions from a duetting partner - can be put into play as operational principles. Rather than functioning as a generic, and largely inconsequential vessel, which the improviser then fills with movement inventions stemming solely from the kinesthetic (or tactile) sense, then, the specificity of the architectural space as it is *visually and corporeally* experienced penetrates and informs the improviser's somatic choices. Space, to borrow William Forsythe's

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<sup>14</sup> Reminding oneself of the eye/brain formation also cements the lived connectivity between the eyes and any other body part. Light rays enter the eye through the cornea and interact with the pigment in the retina's cells and rods, producing nerve impulses that travel to the visual cortex area of the brain - where extensive processing of visual information occurs - and on to the central nervous system.

phenomenological understanding, becomes 'experienced space, the space we see, touch and navigate with our bodies' (Forsythe, 2008: 77) but further, it is the particularity of the space - its size and configuration, height and angle of ceiling, floor and wall textures, architectural features (ledges, curtains, window-sills, technical equipment) - as it is visually *and* kinesthetically experienced that feeds the ongoing emergent movement. In this respect, intentional, direct looking opens the improviser to her surroundings and enables her to fine-tune both her dispositional qualities - environmental attentiveness and receptivity - and the potential range of her expressive palette.

Solo direct looking is thus a kind of solo transmogrification of the various duet and ensemble exercises already mentioned, but it extends their scope by gearing the use of vision around the exigencies of seeding and shaping compositional material.

Using my vision to scan the space, taking the time to simply look at a familiar or unfamiliar studio, I might, for instance, notice straight lines on the floor or walls and begin to explore angularity of the body as a way of responding to this visual information. Or I might explore curves and spirals of the body as a way of working in opposition to the impulse given by the space. The emergent choreography here *is* the articulated response to the visual stimuli and might incorporate imagistic associations (a tightrope, a high-rise building) and/or somatic sensations such as narrowness, tautness, constricted breath, bound flow. Unfolding corporeal responses will generate further movement as the original impulse and the articulated responses to the initial impulse develop,

shift, transform and fade. Through vision, the entire corporeal/conceptual/imaginative body has been mobilized. There is further research to do on how and why specific visual stimuli might provoke certain imagistic/somatic (and emotional) responses - an area of enquiry that might include analysis of the role of the thalamus in processing and relaying sensory information (nerve impulses travel via the thalamus en route to the primary visual areas of the brain). I focus further here, though, on examples of how idiosyncratic features of the space can seed particular choreographic responses.

A small spot of red paint, for instance, imaginatively transforms into an image of blood, with its associative ties (in this instance) of dizziness and fainting [author's studio notes 7/2/13]. Without looking at the paint spot again, spontaneous choreography emerges from an intermingling of the imaginative and emotional associations attached to the image/word 'blood' and the felt sensations of weighty, loose limbs and fast collapses to the floor that emerge as particular vocabularies.

Further examples from my own training and performances include: lighting cables strung along the ceiling prompting sinewy, curvaceous arm movements that lead the rest of the body in spiral pathways around the space; responding to curving archways with drops and undulations of the body that deliberately play with a suspension before the drop; responding to the height of a ceiling with a slow intake of breath accompanied by a steady lift of the chest, head and arms in an upward motion; adopting tensed, clawed hands as a response to rounded joints in the archways but then

counterpointing this with a softening of the chest and torso; being prompted to run by seeing the emergency running figure and then developing the running into a series of falls, jumps and turns that are expansive in their use of space; adopting a stylized 'running' pose in response to the same sign and proceeding to play with balance and imbalance as one leg is kept off the ground and the arms and torso are used as counter-balancing forces [author's studio notes 23-25 August 2011 & 22 September 2011].

These responses incorporate dynamics as well as shape making, the felt sensation of body position and movement; consideration of how movement is seeded, harnessed and shaped as well as what kind of movement emerges. As responses to what is seen and in response to images generated by what is seen, the work is a kind of living, experienced geometry.

As compositional responses are enacted, the improviser can continue to use her vision to see and respond to other features of the performance space. Particularly when travelling and traversing the space, shifting directions and positions, the visual sources or stimuli will shift with the improviser's location in space. Thus whilst moving in response to an original source (the cables, the lines on the floor), the improviser can overlay and/or shift into new responses to new visual information. Thus movement material may build by layering - at the same time as I am working with spiral pathways influenced by the cables I have seen, I may add in sharp angular cutting motions with my arms as a response to the lines in the architecture. Or I may choose to cut short what I am doing and concentrate on one visual source at a time.

These kinds of permutations are endless and illuminate the principles of receptivity to the inclinations and impulses of the imagination/body and following through the feeling sense that is sparked by visual information. The improviser treats the space as a partner (albeit an unmoving partner), using vision as the instigator of heightened environmental awareness and as a spur to the enactment of corporeal responses to what is seen, imaged and felt. In prioritizing external, visual information as the stimulus to movement, this training is grounded in the dialectic between how much the space 'offers' by way of choreographic stimulation and the improviser's active corporeal and imaginative engagement with what she sees. By opening herself to her surroundings through her vision, extending her body into the surrounding space through the act of looking and *intending* to connect with some aspect of the surrounds, the mover adopts a corporeal and dispositional openness and, additionally, begins the process of experiencing and composing movement that is particular to her inhabitation of a particular space and its constituent elements.<sup>15</sup>

As a minor addendum to this article's treatment of vision as a literal tool in the space - all of the invocations of vision have attended to what our corporeal facticity enables by way of vision/movement connectivity - it is also interesting to briefly note the imaginative constructs of vision in various training models. Rather than always literally using your eyes where they are, Wunder, for instance, plays with 'unsighted looking'; a mode in which the improviser tries

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<sup>15</sup> There are loose echoes here of Grotowski's articulation of making 'contact' with the people in one's environment. To make 'contact' is not a 'position' that one adopts - it is 'not staring'. Rather it is 'to see' in a fluid and responsive matter. (Grotowski, 1968: 186).

to look at his partner as if he had 'eyes at the back of [his] skull' (Wunder, 2006: 154). Dilley's direct looking also includes the instruction to 'look from the back of your head' rather than trying to 'push through the eyeballs' (Stark Smith, 2005: 40). These ideas also seem to create a quality of corporeal intentionality when tested in the space, because the instruction to 'look' muscularly informs the movement of the head, neck, shoulders and torso and encourages precise directionality and spatial orientation.<sup>16</sup>

## **Conclusion**

The primary aim of this paper has been to propose and situate a form of solo direct looking that can be practiced as a means of training for solo dances which are improvised in performance.

In addition and contrast to Contact Improvisation - energetically and spatially characterized by the contact between the dancers' bodies and the concomitant reliance on peripheral or soft vision - and the closed-off energetic sphere of working with closed eyes, the strategy of solo 'direct looking' and somatic exploration of imaginative/corporeal entwinement with the space becomes the primary facilitator of an open, active/receptive and compositionally minded disposition. Treating vision as the 'fifth appendage' in solo dance training facilitates a visual *and* corporeal mode that can be explored alongside the interiority enhanced and subtended by peripheral and/or closed vision, expanding the range and scope of vision/movement

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<sup>16</sup> From here it is possible to develop the imaginative terrain further, placing the 'eyes' in any other part of the body and using them as initiators of movement. See Christoffersen (1993: 109) and Franklin (1996: 257) for two different articulations of this idea.

calibrations that the improviser can access, and in doing so cultivating a mobile and fluid hierarchy of the senses.

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