

SCOTT THURSTON AND SARIE MAIRS SLEE

University of Salford

Vital Signs: Poetry, movement and the writing body

Keywords

poetry
language
movement
dance
Daniel Stern
vitality dynamics
syntax

Abstract

This article outlines a collaborative enquiry between a dancer and a poet. It considers some past and present collaborations between poets and dancers before framing the authors' interest in the traditions of North American postmodern dance and European Physical Theatre. Utilizing Daniel Stern's theory of vitality dynamics and his interest in interdisciplinary artistic collaboration, the authors consider some key aspects of their creative work in the light of these ideas, focusing in particular on the usefulness of the concept of syntax for reflecting on the interrelation between language and movement.

Poets and writers have been fascinated by dance throughout the modern era. As Terri Mester argues in her study of dance imagery in W. B. Yeats, T. S. Eliot, D. H. Lawrence and William Carlos Williams: 'modernists saw in dance a mirror of their own preoccupations' (Mester 1997: 3). Yeats, of course, is author of one of the most famous poetic reflections on dance, in the conclusion of his

poem 'Among School Children' (1928): '[h]ow can we know the dancer from the dance?'. One can also point to earlier examples of poets drawn to movement as well as dance, in, for example Walt Whitman's celebration of the moving body in 'I Sing the Body Electric' (1855): 'to see him pass conveys as much as the best poem, perhaps more'.

Other important instances of poets writing and thinking on, about and *with* dance are Stéphane Mallarmé's influential essays on Loie Fuller's dancing in the 1890s, Paul Valéry's essays on dance from the 1920s and 1930s, William Carlos Williams' collaboration with Martha Graham in the 1940s, Charles Olson's appearance in a Ballet Russes production in Boston in 1940 and his dance play *Apollonius of Tyana* ([1951], 1977), and poet Edwin Denby's dance criticism (1986) from the late 1930s into the 1960s. Goellner and Murphy (in McCarren 1995), Koritz (1995), Mester (1997), Van Den Beukel (2000) and Coulter (2004), have charted some of this territory from a critical perspective.

A number of other contemporary practitioners engaging across dance/movement and poetry indicate a strong resurgence of interest in this area. Examples include the work of dancer and choreographer Simone Forti (1960s onwards) (see below); poet Jackson Mac Low's book of poems for dancers *The Pronouns* ([1964] 1979) (see below); the work of dancer and writer Kenneth King (1968–present) (see below); poet Michael Palmer's collaborations with choreographer Margaret Jenkins (numerous productions since 1975); dancer and writer Sally Silvers' collaborations with poet Bruce Andrews (1980s onwards) (see below); poet, artist and mover Jennifer Pike's collaborations with poet Bob Cobbing (c. 1980s onwards); poet Robert Sheppard's work with dancer Jo Blowers (1990, 2013); poet Carol Snow's work on codifying syntactical patterns in language into a movement vocabulary in 'Syntax: A Reading, Danced' (2005); poet Rodrigo Toscano's 'body movement poems' of his 'Collapsible Poetics Theater' (2007); the Digital Poetry and Dance programme at SUNY Buffalo curated by Loss Pequeño Glazier and Kerry Ring (2011–present); poet Jamie Robles and dancer Nikki Santilli's 'Footsteps on the Page' project (2013–present); poet Alison Gibb's collaboration with dancer and choreographer Elaine Thomas (2013–present); poet and novelist Julie Armstrong-Colton's collaboration with dancer and choreographer Rachel Rimmer (2012–present); writer and artist Emma Cocker's collaboration with performer Victoria Gray and the Choreo-Graphic Devices research group (Vienna) (2013–present); poet Helen Calcutt's 'Bodily Writing' project (2014–present); the work of interdisciplinary writer and performer Laura Burns (2013–present); poet Camilla Nelson's collaboration with Khaled Bargouthi 'Reading Movement' (2015–present), as well as the solo and collaborative work of Julyen Hamilton and Billie Hanne which provides an important context for this special issue.

The authors began working together in the School of Arts and Media at the University of Salford in 2013 to explore the potential of a performance practice arising out of our mutual interests in dance, movement and poetry. Scott had already been developing his interest in this area for some time through practising Five Rhythms (Roth 1989, 1997, 2004) since 2004 and more recently

exploring Contact Improvisation (created by Steve Paxton in 1972, see Baner 1987: 64–65), Authentic Movement (e.g. Whitehouse 1956), Movement Medicine (Darling Khan 2009), Qi Gong and Alexander Technique. Scott has been writing poetry since 1987, developing a profile within the innovative and experimental scene of contemporary UK poetry. Sarie came to the project with training in American modern and postmodern dance, but with professional experience in European forms, including dance theatre and theatre laboratories. Work with written and spoken text within movement forms started in her work with the Liz Lerman Dance Exchange in 2002 and, after emigration to the UK, has been a key element of her creative exploration as an artist/academic working in physical performance practice.

Since beginning Five Rhythms Scott observed an almost immediate influence on the subjects and forms of his poetic practice, which led to the composition of a number of poems informed by this practice (2008, 2010, 2011, 2014). In 2011 he started to research practices combining poetry and movement beginning with the Judson Dance Theater (1962–66). One work of particular interest was a book of dance-instruction poems written by the poet Jackson Mac Low (1922–2004) called *The Pronouns: A Collection of Forty Dances for the Dancers* ([1964] 1979), a rare performance of which, directed by his daughter Clarinda Mac Low and entitled *40 Dancers do 40 Dances for the Dancers*, Scott attended over three nights in New York in September 2012. Mac Low's contemporary Simone Forti (b. 1935) – for whom he specifically compiled a set of dance instruction cards for use in movement improvisation called 'Nuclei for Simone Forti' – has used language and movement in performance and choreography since the mid-1980s in a practice that she calls Logomotion (2003) and performed the Nuclei text within the structure of *40 Dancers*. Scott took part in a workshop with Forti during his visit to New York.

Among the next generation of New York cross-genre artists post-Judson to be interested in exploring the relationship between movement and language are the dancer Sally Silvers (who also performed in *40 Dancers*) and poet Bruce Andrews – one of the key figures of the North American 'Language Poetry' movement. Scott interviewed Silvers and Andrews in New York about their collaborative work together (2013). Although no longer actively making dances, second-generation Judson Dance Theater figure Kenneth King (1948–present) danced in the original performances of Mac Low's *Pronouns* in 1965 and used language in expansive and complex ways in his choreography, which also drew on his interest in philosophers of dance such as Nietzsche and Susanne Langer. In his book *Writing in Motion*, King declares: 'the writer must dance and the dancer write' ([1992] 2003: 137).

The work of Judson Dance Theater in the 1960s provides a number of key references from which our practical research draws, as this dance lineage both involved and promoted experimentation and a multi-disciplinary approach. However, this research also positions its investigations within the European dance theatre tradition and its integration of dramaturgical thinking.

In her exploration of tanztheater as a genre, Valerie Preston-Dunlop explores the *polysemantic nature* of this work, not only because it is open to different interpretations, but as the signs formed in dance theatre performance emerge from a 'conglomerate of features' integrating both concurrent and sequential signs from a range of sign systems. American postmodern dance also shares this polysemantic aspect, but holds a different attitude towards the meaning, reading or appreciation of the final work: the negotiation of meaning is left to the spectator. Merce Cunningham articulated this in his own work, stating: 'we don't aim at producing a specific, emotional result. We present the event and leave it up to the audience to decide what is and what is not expressed' (Preston-Dunlop and Sanchez-Colberg 2002: 20). This approach has its analogue in the reader-oriented poetics of Language Poetry (1984). With choreographic modes rooted in chance and unconstructed juxtaposition emergent in the Judson context, American postmodern dance often consciously makes room for the audience's reception/perception to create the mortar to bind the meaning between disparate elements together. This particularly suits multi-disciplinary collaboration, supporting a polysemantic texture that allows meaning to remain in flux, led by individual synthesis and interpretation.

Dance theatre's use of disparate performative elements – movement, sound, speech, mediated materials, physical materials – are negotiated differently, involving a layer of dramaturgy or 'dramaturgical thinking' (Berhndt 2010: 190), which embeds processes that develop 'a strategy of realising dramatic structures' within the work as a whole (Traub 2011: 1) and 'paradigms of coexistence of and interplay between different strands of meaning' (Smart 2012: 180). Dance dramaturgy is an emergent area of study (Berhndt 2010; Kirk 2011; Traub 2011; Solomon 2013; Smart 2012). Berhndt cites dramaturgist Raimund Hoghe's collaboration with Pina Bausch and Wuppertal Tanztheater from 1980 to 1989 as one of the first examples of dance dramaturgy, laying the foundations in post-modern dance theatre for the desire for and negotiation of gestalt within complex, physically driven performance. In this, the integration of dramaturgy or dramaturgical thinking is fundamental in the creative methods that define dance theatre as a genre.

In shaping the conceptual and practical frameworks for this collaborative research, the creative practices of both American postmodern dance and European dance theatre find distinct, but equally important roles. As outlined above, the American tradition provides a series of past collaborations and multi-disciplinary practices between movement and poetry from which this project might work or depart. However, these practices offer little to support a directed approach to the negotiation of received/perceived meaning. By contrast, in dance theatre, poetry and poetic language are rarely used. In the pursuit of an embodied excavation of a 'lived reality', text and speech integrated into dance theatre works often come from the performers themselves, emergent in the creative process in relation to lived experiences. While this underlines the shared authorial function between the choreographer and dancers within dance theatre (Lepecki in Solomon 2013: 19), few dancers work primarily in/with poetic language. Poetry is often used as a stimulus in modernist choreographic

*In the pursuit
of an embodied
excavation of
a 'lived reality',
text and speech
integrated into
dance theatre
works often
come from
the performers
themselves,
emergent in the
creative process in
relation to lived
experiences.*

Despite the
rich landscape
of interest and
work between
poetry and
dance, there is
room for further
development in
approaches to
interdisciplinary
collaboration
that seek new
transdisciplinary
artistic practices
across these fields.

practices as a reference to which ideas can be abstracted into movement (as evidenced by its integration into the United Kingdom's 'A'-Level Dance syllabus). But the varied performative elements in dance theatre tend to emerge from the performers' experience as creative exploration within a closed circuit; poetry is not written for and therefore rarely present in dance theatre works.

Despite the rich landscape of interest and work between poetry and dance, there is room for further development in approaches to *interdisciplinary* collaboration that seek new *transdisciplinary* artistic practices across these fields. Drawing from Felicia McCarren's analysis of Mallarmé's essays on dance, she sees portrayed the concept that 'for the dancer to operate as poetry par excellence, she herself must remain outside of language, unable to manipulate it, and unconscious of the revelations she brings to the poet watching her' (McCarren 1995: 217). This concept chimes with the normative practices between dance and poetry: dancers might inspire poetry and poetry might inspire dance, but both dancers and poets remain mutually 'unable to manipulate' within the other's form and 'unconscious of revelation' sparked in either language or movement.

As a dancer and poet working collaboratively, our main aspiration is to create new forms of transdisciplinary artistic practice. Our work consciously draws from the multi-disciplinary and/or collaborative practices of American postmodern dance and deploys the creative and dramaturgical modes implicit in European dance theatre, supporting interdisciplinary exploration that shifts co-composition away from defined performance products of 'the poetry reading' or 'the dance performance'. The central aim is to move the relationship between dancers and writers away from that identified by McCarren, developing methods to support creatives as mover-writers with capacity to manipulate both writing and movement while remaining fully conscious of the polysemantic revelations emergent in transdisciplinary work.



Figure 1: Sarie Mairs Slee and Scott Thurston,
studio improvisation for *Vital Signs* January 2014.
Photograph courtesy of Richard Meftah Creative
Imaging.

In conceiving of a series of research questions we devised the following sequence:

- For both poets and dancers, the relationship between the body and meaning is central, through embodied aspects of poetic language and through meaning-making in dance. How can interdisciplinary collaboration between poets and dancers in composition and performance throw new light on embodied meaning-making?
- In performance, how might the written word and the acts of writing be played out in a movement context, involving all performers as mover-writers? How might performances be crafted to allow poetry spoken aloud to be integrated with movement?
- Can 'vitality dynamics' (time, space, movement, direction and force) be activated as compositional and performance principles, both in interdisciplinary collaboration and towards new forms of transdisciplinary artistic practice?
- How can this new transdisciplinary approach enhance the impact of dance and poetry on audiences?

Daniel Stern's (1924–2012) work on the concept of vitality provides an important theoretical framework for this enquiry. Although he begins by treating vitality as 'a mental creation, as a product of the mind's integration of many internal and external events, as a subjective experience, and as a phenomenal reality' (Stern 2010: 4), vitality also has a basis in physical action and can be best illustrated by beginning with movement. A movement 'unfolds in a certain stretch of time [...] Therefore a sense of time, shape and duration is created in the mind, along with the movement' (2010: 4). In addition to time, movement also brings a perception of a force or forces behind or within the movement, defines a space in which it has to happen and also has a sense of direction and intentionality. For Stern these elements: movement, time, force, space and intention/directionality, are only theoretically different and give rise to the experience of vitality. Examples of how we experience this gestalt might include how we perceive and respond to the 'dynamics' of vitality: 'the force, speed and flow of a gesture; the timing and stress of a spoken phrase or even a word; the way one breaks into a smile' (2010: 6). Stern lists words like 'exploding, swelling, drawn out, forceful, cresting, rushing, relaxing, fluttering' (2010: 7) to show how language conveys this kind of experience.

Stern also uses the concept of vitality dynamics to discuss the way we experience cultural products such as music, dance, theatre and cinema. The time-based arts, Stern argues, are concerned with the 'dynamics of experiences' (2010: 75), which they make available to audiences through the basic dynamic elements of each art form, for example, in the musical concepts of intensity, stress, flow, tempo and rhythm. In a way particularly pertinent to this enquiry, Stern is interested in collaboration across art forms because of how vitality dynamics are 'readily transferable between art forms' (2010: 79). The ability to render similar, but not identical, experiences creates an aesthetic 'magic' of

*In addition to
time, movement
also brings a
perception of a
force or forces
behind or within
the movement,
defines a space
in which it has
to happen and
also has a sense
of direction and
intentionality.*

pairing the similar with the ‘not exactly the same’ (2010: 78). Stern recounts his experience of working with the theatre artist Robert Wilson as an example of how the vitality dynamics of ‘mental motions’ in Wilson’s mind whilst at breakfast – captured in a ‘micro-analytic’ interview – are transformed into the vitality dynamics of bodily movement onstage in, for example, how Wilson’s experience of his thoughts ‘not quite getting anywhere’ is translated into an actor running in circles that do not arrive at a resolution (2010: 93).

However, Stern does not treat ‘language-based’ arts in the same detail as time-based arts, but simply comments on how the fact that they take place simultaneously in ‘real time’ and ‘narrative time’ complicates the situation. He consciously puts off the problem of dynamic experience in prose and poetry, despite recognizing that these art forms have ‘implicit non-linguistic “rules”’ for expressing vitality forms’ (2010: 77), and ignores the performance aspect of composing and sharing language-based art. Our enquiry therefore seeks to pursue some of Stern’s own research questions whilst exploring the gap concerning language-based arts. The questions of Stern that are particularly relevant include: ‘can the same vitality forms be triggered by two or more art forms? Will their effects be complementary or additive, or more than the sum of the parts? What may artistic collaborations tell us?’ (2010: 76). Stern’s vitality dynamics therefore provide a strong, additional theoretical framework through which to observe the effects of combining aesthetic strategies from the two traditions in new inter- and transdisciplinary ways.

Our initial period of practical experimentation commenced in December 2013 and started in a state of exchange, often leading each other in activities that involved movement and writing and that drew from our past, individual experiences. In this first phase of ‘exchange,’ we used improvisation as the primary mode of working, as it drew on both of our prior experiences (i.e. Roth’s Five



Figure 2: Scott Thurston, studio improvisation for Vital Signs January 2014. Photograph courtesy of Richard Meftah Creative Imaging.

Rhythms, Contact Improvisation). Improvisational activity would often involve a combination of writing or mark-making, speaking and moving within a given score or activity. Work was sporadic, but occurred in half-day or full-day studio sessions to allow time for fuller embodiment to develop within our improvisational activity. In September 2014, the work shifted in three ways. First, we set aside a six-day period in which to work intensively, securing a room in which we could write, draw or mark-make on the walls and floors. We also shifted from a focus on improvised material to set material – set movement and set text – which allowed us to experiment more with the possibilities of re-ordering, solo composition or improvisation around common material. This shifted the nature of the work from ‘exchange’ to ‘experimentation’, as most of the tasks we devised were new and untested, rather than drawn from past experience. As this experimentation allowed physical mark-making to happen, the room became an artefact of the ongoing experimentation, documenting the activity through visible accumulation. In this ‘experimentation’ phase, we developed three main areas of technique that allowed us to experiment with the dynamics of movement, time, force, space and intention/directionality in various ways as follows:

- improvised movement and verbalization responding to pre-composed fragments of poetic text
- experimentation with textual mark-making as a movement performance using co-composed poetic material
- generating choreographed movement phrases within memorized and verbalized co-composed poetic text in performance

An important source of material in our experimentation was a deck of 57 cards devised by Scott for use as material in improvisation. The deck was inspired by Jackson Mac Low’s aforementioned ‘Nuclei for Simone Forti’ – a deck of 56 cards composed for Forti in 1961 with ‘groups of words and action phrases around which dancers build spontaneous improvisations’ (Mac Low [1964] 1979: viii).

The third technique generated some of the most interesting material, as we began to perceive a ‘more than the sum of its parts’ quality that was no longer simply poetry AND dance; or dance WITH poetry. First, Sarie devised choreographed material in response to a selection of eleven cards from the deck. When designing a set choreographic phrase to work with, the movement was kept relatively simple and moved away from highly recognizable dance vocabulary. As it was taught, more focus was given to the drive of the action (i.e. ‘reach forward and then allow yourself to fall’) and the mechanics to enable it rather than physical detail or aesthetic quality. As a result, we held a common physical phrase, but one which was performed with differences in nuance and delivery by each person.

Once Sarie had taught this choreography to Scott we returned to the original cards that had inspired the movement, and sought to find a satisfactory arrangement of the linguistic phrases into

*We found that
the individual
choreographed
movements of the
phrase and the
linguistic phrases
of the poetic
text entered into
a relationship
with each other
that suggested
equivalence and
translatability
beyond (if
also including)
a mimetic
correspondence
between word
and movement.*

a poetic form; corresponding to the order of the choreography whilst also taking into account formal poetic features such as lineation, syntax and enjambment. The resulting text was as follows:

Assemble for a new game:
pre-gestures inside oneself unravel
forms unclutter images. Mover
moving with sound. Part grounded
part flying. What have you forgotten
to say?

A rich set of conflicts and retreats, a little
point where the soul turns back.
Stay within yourself and see
yourself as reflected within yourself.
Who is moving? Fail to get
to the other side of the room.

Having memorized this text, we then performed it verbally together with the choreography in solo and duet form, noticing and comparing the differences in our handling of the timings of text and movement. We found that the individual choreographed movements of the phrase and the linguistic phrases of the poetic text entered into a relationship with each other that suggested equivalence and translatability beyond (if also including) a mimetic correspondence between word and movement.



Figure 3: Sarie Mairs Slee and Scott Thurston, studio improvisation for Vital Signs January 2014. Photograph courtesy of Richard Meftah Creative Imaging.

Reflecting on this effect, Stern's vitality forms became an important frame for understanding how this 'more than the sum of its parts' quality was being realized. The vitality effects triggered by both the movement and the poetic language seemed connected to the micro-structures within both the movements and sentences, suggesting a kind of common 'syntax' between the forms (see below). Thus dynamics such as tensing, releasing, unfolding, turning etc., were being communicated by *both* the movement and linguistic material *at once*, achieving the aesthetic interest of 'pairing the similar with the "not exactly the same"'.

In relating these ideas back to the text itself it is not perhaps unusual to recognize the degree to which the verbs in the poem contribute to these effects: 'assemble', 'unravel', 'unclutter', 'say', 'moving', 'flying', 'turns', 'stay', 'see' and 'get' all contain a sense of vitality dynamics as part of their meaning. Phrases such as 'pre-gestures inside oneself', 'part grounded part flying', 'stay within yourself' also evoke performance instructions in which a verbal suggestion can influence the performance of a movement – see for example Stern's account of Jerome Robbins' choreographic practice utilizing the instruction: 'Do it faster...only slower' (Stern 2010: 86). Nouns like 'game', 'forms', 'images', 'part', 'set', 'conflicts', 'retreats', 'soul', and the phrase 'the other side of the room' also play their part in constructing a virtual space and potential themes, particularly in the context of a minimal use of adjectives like 'new', 'part' and 'rich'.

In this phase, we began to notice the dynamic possibilities in the structure or microstructure within movement phrases/individual movements and overall lines/sentences/words of a poem as they were combined and recombined, informing reception or perceived meaning. Small differences and variations seemed to convey vitality dynamics in the way that syntax, for example, modulates the onset, development and conclusion of an idea, corresponding to the subject–verb–object structure of a sentence. In parallel with this, the attendant dynamic modulations of tone, volume, pitch and pace of the verbal delivery alongside the dynamics of time, space, force, and intention of the movement delivery, began to build up a layered and potentially meaningful texture.

Simone Forti, Sally Silvers and Carol Snow all discuss the role of syntax in the relationship between text and movement. Forti uses it as a metaphor for the body's range of movement (Steffen 2012) whilst Silvers sees an analogy between the unitized and recombinative properties of words and movements, noting the use of the grammatical term 'phrase' in dance (Vriezen 2005). Snow's interest in finding analogous relationships between movement and words resulted in a 'code' containing combinations such as 'partnering for prepositional phrases, touching the ground for negatives, turns for gerunds, and lifts for infinitives' (2015).

In Spring 2016, we began a new phase in the practical work with the intention to share outcomes with audiences. After extensive periods of exchange and experimentation, we focused on processes of composition, specifically 'co-composition'. At this stage the potential alignment between the concepts of syntax and dramaturgy became useful. Syntax offered a paradigm for the relationship

*Small differences
and variations
seemed to convey
vitality dynamics
in the way
that syntax,
for example,
modulates
the onset,
development
and conclusion
of an idea,
corresponding to
the subject_verb_
object structure of
a sentence.*

between order and meaning and working consciously with it allowed us to take elements of an individual phrase and experiment with small changes in focus, timing, tone, proximity, force or facial expression in relation to order, thus giving more conscious access to the vitality dynamics of the material. However, the perceived shifts in meaning that occurred as a result drew more on the dramaturgy of the material, the 'coexistence of and interplay between different strands of meaning' created by these changes (Smart 2012: 180). In the early sessions of this 'co-composition' phase, we worked with excerpts from new poems by Scott. The use of common written or spoken material allowed us to focus on different compositional possibilities and the alteration of order or structure towards different meanings, as well as the reasons why one choice in rhythm or volume resulted in one interpretation rather than another.

As we moved towards a practical showing, we started by co-composing a poem. A series of lines or excerpts were written by each person and then brought together into a poem defined as much for the page as for the voice:

Vital Signs

Late spring in the early autumn aimed
at those slipping through the net. Beyond
the desire to move together, own how we
are moving: fight for community's moments.

An articulate body occasionally murmurs that
we are here, replaced by the poem again.
Watching, we see the difference, focusing
on the relationship to the group.

It seems to tinker and play, pulling from
recognisable faces or places to something lost
or new. Commit to find value but not deny
it where it lights in someone else's vision.

Love poetry without destroying love: she doesn't
censor naturally. Bringing too much effort
toward meaning, an articulate body tired
of all the talking. Touching the edge of
syncopated, harmonised reduction: conflict
bodies for the logoclast, physical force like a

volcano. You feel the thought of the explosion,
even when there are no signs. Separating from

the group speaking on the opposite side,
toughness becomes strength. Sounding out
something, passed a sign of my own following,
dancing in a city with no smiles and

a dozen rivers.

As a structure for the work presentation, we used the poem as a spine, devising two ‘versions’ of each of the stanzas with consciously different compositional approaches in each version. This initial showing would have performance fragments, but not full consideration of transitions, use of the space, scenography or relationship to the audience. Co-compositional responses to two of the stanzas have been selected for description and analysis below, serving as representative material for the practical showing as a whole.

In working with some of the stanzas, such as the fifth, we consciously made the difference between the two versions substantial, both in structure and in meaning. In the first version, five words were extracted from the poem (‘destroying’, ‘bringing’, ‘meaning’, ‘talking’, ‘touching’) and five short movement fragments were devised involving both Scott and Sarie, each ending in a still position for the statement of the word by one of the two performers. In each of the five fragments in this first version, the movement was deeply abstracted or non-representational in relation to the spoken word. The only deviation was in the fragment leading to the final word, where Sarie traced a line across Scott’s back and chest as he remained still before settling into a position where they remained lightly in contact, Sarie’s hand on Scott’s opposite shoulder before saying the final word ‘touching’. While the final position was closer in proximity through the physical contact, direct mimesis was avoided by a choice in focus, in which Sarie settled her gaze in the opposite direction.

In the second version of the fifth stanza, the acts of speaking and moving were performed simultaneously, alongside mark-making in chalk on the wall. The treatment of the text was structured much more as a dialogue, with words or portions of the text spoken by one person to the other, often in response to or in reference to the other. As a starting action, Scott began to draw a wave-like line, saying ‘love’; Sarie joined, drawing another chalk line beside him, saying ‘poetry’. As they continued to draw intersecting lines and make eye contact, Scott verbally offered ‘love poetry’. Continuing the mark-making action, Sarie said slowly ‘Love poetry without... destroying... love’ and, on the final word, both dropped to the floor, tracing the movement with sharp fast lines in chalk downwards. Sarie immediately stood and started to rub against the wavy lines with her back as Scott offered ‘she doesn’t censor naturally’ and retrieved one of her hands, stopping her

movement to trace around her arm and fingers on the wall with chalk. Later in the phrase, Sarie moved Scott into the position she had occupied, with his hand in the chalk outline, emphasizing words in the phrase '*tired of all the talking*' with chalk slashes extending out from Scott's fingers as the words were spoken. The final words of the stanza – 'touching the edge' – were not spoken; instead, Scott and Sarie moved very slowly from everyday standing poses to touch shoulders, but quickly moving away before contact was made.

The material in these two versions of stanza five took different approaches within the vocal and movement materials created and the sequencing therein. The first version chose to layer the movement and text sequentially; alternating cyclically between moving and speaking, it allowed the meaning-bound words to either punctuate or explain the more abstracted sequence that had preceded it. Each movement/word sequence was positioned as a unit; few compositional actions were taken to contextualize one 'unit' with another, which allowed the singular words to be heard or 'read' as discrete rather than a continuum. The second version was co-composed as a more 'human' interaction: cultural norms within the use of eye contact, longer sequences of spoken text and the tone of the voice were considered in the material created. The metaphor of syntax for the relationship between meaning and order was present in both, but also in the relationship between the two versions, affecting the dramaturgy of the performed material for this stanza. In the first version, certain words were highlighted and the first hint of a human connection came at the end of the fragment (the physical contact preceding the final word 'touching'). As this transitioned to the second section, this human connection was further deepened through the opening stated word 'love' and the mirrored action of intertwining chalk lines. By introducing the relationship to be abstract and movement-centred and then moving towards a more interpersonal exchange, it brought specific choices regarding order and meaning directly into relationship with the dramaturgical choices for the crafting of the 'whole'.

In other sections of the showing, the materials used in the two versions were consciously similar, using either repetition or a theme-and-variation approach as compositional tools. For the third stanza, Scott composed a phrase in which all the poetic text was spoken aloud and accompanied by movement. The phrase began by Scott making plucking motions with both hands on both sides of an I-beam girder in the middle of the studio space, creating actual sounds in the room. Moving away from the girder, Scott continued the same movement and commented 'it seems to tinker and play'. The movement was continuous, with words or word phrases intersecting specific movements. In one section, Scott lifted both hands in an arc upwards to the left and then right, speaking the words 'faces' and 'places' at the height of each of the arcing motions. Later, having arrived at a position alongside the girder, Scott suddenly extended his right hand into the space, palm upward, as if casting something away, coinciding with the phrase 'to something lost'. Towards the end of the phrase, coming to standing, Scott thrust the left arm forward

perpendicular to the floor and wound the right arm backwards to the words 'where it' and, in an overarm action, brought the index and forefinger of the right hand to touch the left hand on the word 'lights'. Adjusting so that both hands were now parallel to the floor, palms downward, he drew the right-hand back and down very emphatically three times in time with the beat of the phrase 'in someone else's vision'.

The second version of this material for this stanza involved Scott immediately repeating the choreography but without language whilst Sarie followed Scott's movement at a short distance, keeping her focus on him throughout to make the mirroring action visible. In Scott's solo, language was adopting a number of roles in relation to the movement – sometimes mimetic (e.g. as in casting something away which becomes 'lost'), sometimes responding to rhythm or sound (e.g. the rhyme of 'faces' and 'places' utilized equivalent movements to the left and right) and sometimes achieving an abstraction (e.g. a circular shape for the word 'recognizable', which responded to the shape of the 'o' in the word). What was particularly interesting was the heightened quality of the silence during the non-verbal rendering of the same choreography, as if the meaning of the words still hung in the space whilst the movement returned, and that the movement retained an intention towards the language.

From a dramaturgical perspective, the exact repetition of the movement/vocal phrase made the material more familiar to the audience in its second viewing. As Scott first performed the material as a solo, the material was recognizable as 'his' and this was consciously reinforced as it was repeated and closely mirrored by Sarie. While she made small alterations in facing to keep the spatial relationship in flux, the two versions of the stanza worked to reinforce Scott's voice and authorship in this section. It would seem here again that syntax proves an enabling metaphor for understanding the subtly shifting relationships between movement and text, as well as between the performers in the space, as they combine to make meaning out of their respective vitality dynamics. It is possible to imagine continuing to work with this repeated phrase in order to keep refining the detail and precision of the interaction of the different elements, the combination of movement and language allowing each set of vitality dynamics to become more engaged as they interact with each other and are shaped dramaturgically towards the creation of perceived meaning.

In conclusion, our examination of the relationship between syntax (both linguistic and physical) and dramaturgy in this most recent phase of the project has proved most fruitful. It also provides a basis for a further consideration of each of Stern's vitality dynamics in more detail, building on some previous elements of our studio practice. Although one cannot separate one vitality dynamic from another except theoretically, the gestalt is highly suggestive. For example, our exploration of the dynamic of force led us to experiment with contrasting patterns of effort in improvised movement, but also to consider the issue of tone (i.e. understood in a literary sense as the narrator's attitude to their listener) in the context of writing a haiku or tanka about the view from the studio window.

*It would seem
here again that
syntax proves an
enabling metaphor
for understanding
the subtly shifting
relationships
between
movement and
text, as well
as between the
performers in the
space, as they
combine to make
meaning out of
their respective
vitality dynamics.*

Whilst vitality dynamics necessarily remain implicit in all that we do, directing this conscious attention to them within the context of a dialogue between poetry and dance has enabled us to bring a finer level of discrimination to our creative choices within this collaboration.

References

- Andrews, B. and Bernstein, C. (eds) (1984), *The L=A=N=G=U=A=G=E Book*, Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University Press.
- Banes, S. (1987), *Terpsichore in Sneakers: Post-Modern Dance*, Hanover, NH: Wesleyan University Press.
- Berhndt, S. (2010), 'Dance, dramaturgy, and dramaturgical thinking', *Contemporary Theatre Review*, 20: 2, pp. 185–96.
- Beukel, K. van den. (2000), *The Dance Topos in Modernist Literature: 1890–1930*, unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Cambridge.
- Coulter, M. (2004), *The Eroticised Body and the Transcendent Word: Representations of the Dancer in the Works of Théophile Gautier, Arthur Symons and W.B. Yeats*, unpublished Ph.D. thesis, University of Canterbury.
- Darling Khan, Y. and Darling Khan, S. (2009), *Movement Medicine: How to Awaken, Dance and Live Your Dreams*, London: Hay House.
- Denby, E. (1968), *Dance Writings and Poetry*, New Haven: Yale University Press.
- Forti, S. (2003), 'Animate dancing', in A. C. Albright and D. Gere (eds), *Taken by Surprise: A Dance Improvisation Reader*, Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press, pp. 53–63.
- King, K. ([1992] 2003), *Writing in Motion: Body – Language – Technology*, Middletown, CT: Wesleyan University Press.
- Kirk, J. (2011), 'Dramaturgy for Dancers', *Dance Teaching Magazine website*, <http://www.dance-teacher.com/2011/10/dramaturgy-for-dancers/>. Accessed 20 October 2016.
- Koritz, A. (1995), *Gendering Bodies/Performing Art: Dance and Literature in Early Twentieth-Century British Culture*, Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press.
- Mac Low, J. ([1964] 1979), *The Pronouns: A Collection of Forty Dances for the Dancers*, New York: Station Hill.
- McCarren, F. (1995), 'Stéphane Mallarmé, Loie Fuller, and the theater of femininity', in E. W. Goellner and J. S. Murphy (eds), *Bodies of the Text*, New Brunswick, NJ: Rutgers University Press, pp. 217–30.

- Mester, T. (1997), *Movement and Modernism: Yeats, Eliot, Lawrence, Williams, and Early Twentieth-Century Dance*, Fayetteville: The University of Arkansas Press.
- Olson, C. (1951), 'Apollonius of Tyana', in G. F. Butterick (ed) (1977), *The Fiery Hunt and Other Plays*, Bolinas, CA: Four Seasons Foundation.
- Preston-Dunlop, V. and Sanchez-Colberg, A. (2002), *Dance and the Performative: A Choreological Perspective – Laban and Beyond*, London: Verve Books.
- Roth, G. ([1989] 1998), *Maps to Ecstasy*, Novato, CA: Nataraj Publishing.
- (1997), *Sweat Your Prayers*, Dublin: Newleaf.
- (2004), *Connections: The Five Threads of Intuitive Wisdom*, New York: Tarcher/Penguin.
- Smart, J. (2012), 'The dialogic dramaturgy in Matthew Bourne's *Dorian Gray*', *Studies in Theatre and Performance*, 32: 2, pp. 179–91.
- Snow, C. (2015), 'Carol Snow/Alex Ketley (interview with Jamie Robles)', <https://swingingfeet.wordpress.com/snow-ketley/>. Accessed 26 May 2016.
- Solomon, P. (2013), 'Inside/besides dance studies', *Dance Research Journal*, 45: 3, pp. 5–28.
- Steffen, P. (2012), 'Forti on all fours: A talk with Simone Forti', 37: 1, *Contact Quarterly Online Journal*, <https://community.contactquarterly.com/journal/view/onallfours>. Accessed 7 September 2012.
- Stern, D. (2010), *Forms of Vitality: Exploring Dynamic Experience in Psychology, the Arts, Psychotherapy, and Development*, Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Thurston, S. (2008), *Momentum*, Exeter: Shearsman Books.
- (2010), *Of Being Circular*, Newton-le-Willows: The Knives Forks and Spoons Press.
- (2011), *Reverses Heart's Reassembly*, London: Veer Books.
- (2013), 'Sally Silvers and Bruce Andrews: An interview by Scott Thurston', *Movement Research: Critical Correspondence*, <https://movementresearch.org/publications/critical-correspondence/sally-silvers-and-bruce-andrews-an-interview-by-scott-thurston>. Accessed 26 April 2017.
- (2014), *Figure Detached Figure Impermanent*, Hunstanton: Oystercatcher Press.
- Traub, S. (2011), 'Dance dramaturgy: A critical and discursive practice', Goethe Institute, <http://www.goethe.de/ins/cm/en/yao/kul/mag/the/7179326.html>. Accessed 2 October 2015.
- Vreizen, S. (2005), 'Bruce Andrews and Sally Silvers in *Perdu*, February 2005', <http://sqv.home.xs4all.nl/Andrews.html>. Accessed 17 May 2012.

Whitehouse, M. (1956), 'Creative Expression in Physical Movement is Language without Words', in P. Pallaro (ed) (1999), *Authentic Movement: Essays by Mary Whitehouse, Janet Adler and Joan Chodorow*, London and Philadelphia: Jessica Kingsley Publishers.

Suggested citation

Thurston, S. and Slee, S. M. (2017), 'Vital Signs: Poetry, movement and the writing body', *Choreographic Practices*, 8: 1, pp. 9–25, doi: 10.1386/chor.8.1.9_1

Contributor details

Scott Thurston, reader in English and creative writing at the University of Salford, is a poet, mover, critic, lecturer, editor and events-organizer. His current research combines a long-standing interest in alternative movement practices with a creative and critical background in innovative poetry in the United Kingdom and North America. His most recent poetry publication is *Figure Detached Figure Impermanent* (Oystercatcher, 2014) and a recent article is 'Contemporary innovative poetry by women in the United Kingdom' (*Contemporary Women's Writing*, 2015). He is co-editor of the *Journal of British and Irish Innovative Poetry* and co-organizer of The Other Room poetry reading series in Manchester.

Contact: School of Arts and Media, University of Salford, Salford, M5 4WT, UK.
E-mail: s.thurston@salford.ac.uk

Sarie Mairs Slee, lecturer in dance at the University of Salford, has been working in the messy territories between dance and theatre for the last fifteen years, exploring links between the embodied experience of our humanity and the signifiatory power of the body in performance. From 2010 to 2013, her work has focused on collaboration with Studio Matejka, a performance laboratory ensemble in permanent residence at the Grotowski Institute in Wrocław, Poland. In these and other collaborations, she has been exploring interdisciplinary and collaborative practices centred on embodiment as process, expression and identity.

Contact: School of Arts and Media, University of Salford, Salford, M5 4WT, UK.
E-mail: s.m.slee@salford.ac.uk

Scott Thurston and Sarie Mairs Slee have asserted their right under the Copyright, Designs and Patents Act, 1988, to be identified as the authors of this work in the format that was submitted to Intellect Ltd.



Journal of Dance and Somatic Practices

ISSN 1757-1871 | Online ISSN 1757-188X

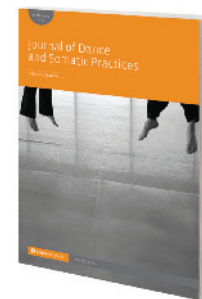
2 issues per volume | Volume 3, 2011

Principal Editor

Sarah Whatley
Coventry University
s.whatley@coventry.ac.uk

Associate Editors

Kirsty Alexander
Kirsty.Alexander@theplace.org.uk
Natalie Garrett
n.garrett@coventry.ac.uk



Aims and Scope

This new journal focuses on the relationship between dance and somatic practices, and the influence of this body of practice on the wider performing arts.

Call for Papers

Articles might consider the following themes:

- How the pedagogical philosophy of somatics might be seen to challenge dominant approaches to learning and creativity
- The history of somatic practices
- The current application of somatics to dance/performing arts training and education
- The aesthetic implication of working with/from a somatic understanding
- The 'body' as a site of discourse in western culture, the influence of eastern cultures on notions of embodiment and how somatic practices challenge / collude with these ideas.