

# Bodies as signals, nodes, networks

John Bailey

## Lucy Guerin's *Aether*

Writing about dance, perhaps more than other forms of performance, is always an act of translation. In attempting to think about dance, there is often the tendency to characterise it in terms of the thinking with which the writer is most familiar—namely words. But unlike text or orally based modes of performance, movement provides a form of experience which is not reducible to language, though it may be possible to use words to approach this experience at an angle, as it were. But this act of translation always carries with it the risk of losing something in the process, or even adding something which did not exist in the original.

Lucy Guerin's *Aether* brings language into the field of dance in a daring way. Halfway through the performance there is an interruption, during which one of the artists moves downstage to deliver a monologue about the work. We are told that the second half of *Aether* will include dialogue delivered by the performers. The monologue becomes increasingly self-reflexive as the dancer explains how this introduction of language, of dancers speaking, was a point of contention during the rehearsal process. One dancer, we are told, was uncomfortable with the idea of speaking during a dance work. Moreover, she



Byron Perry, Antony Hamilton, Kirstie McCracken, *Aether*

Rachele Roberts

felt that audiences found male dancers speaking more forgivable than female dancers.

All of this only begins to suggest the remarkable density of *Aether*, its layering of rich and provocative ideas and contradictions within a busy, visually dynamic and formally innovative structure. The monologue, as mentioned, works to split the piece into 2 halves. The first part is more coherent, a sustained attempt to use dance to think through the shapes and outlines of postmodern communication and technology. The performers, heads shaven and clad in billowing shifts of neutral hue, are genderless clones, lacking individuality or identity. Contemporary dance frequently invokes a mechanistic philosophy to present the body as a machine, whether idealised or problematised; *Aether* offers us bodies as networks, nodes, radiation and flickering signals. These are bodies as frequencies, variable rather than immanent. There is a strong focus on fingers, skittering across keyboards or seeking out an available socket; as electrodes, antenna, spidery points of connection. The overall movement of the dancers appears chaotic rather than unified, but a logic slowly emerges. Relationships between them, when they exist, are fleeting and almost random, as if they are tuning into each other by accident rather than design. What Guerin offers here is an impressive and successful way of imagining the body mediated by technological forms. The glut of visual information presented by the dancers is matched by the overload of sliding images and text in Michaela French's projected graphics and the electronic soundscape composed by Gerald Mair.

When *Aether*'s second half commences with the introduction of language, communication takes on a less abstract form as the dancers begin to seek out ways of interacting. We are offered a series of moments, duets for the most part, in which dancers communicate

through garbled or squeaky voices, pidgin squeals or incoherent mutterings. Once again, hands often lead movement, but they play a less obvious role: it is interesting to see eyes, or more accurately eyelines, given a more prominent position. Dancers watch each other as they attempt to find a common tongue, or a physical point of connection. This is an observant touch, given the role of the visual in interpersonal communication, but it also takes the audience into less familiar territory, as eye contact between dancers is frequently given second billing to the contact between bodies. An eye that observes becomes a subject, and a subject that speaks defines itself even more closely. In these ways, the second half of *Aether* charts an original and intriguing course. It's not neatly as accessible as the former section, nor as noisy and unstructured. The latter part doesn't appear to be held together by the same set of underlying thematic concerns, and at times it can be difficult to ascertain the intentions behind certain sequences, or the reasons for their juxtaposition. But again, this may just be the part of my brain possessed by the linguistic bias attempting to find a syntactic order in a construction not defined by the lineaments of language.

## Dance Card

The pleasures afforded by viewing improvisation are entwined with this same hunt for an ordering logic: why has this choice been made, and how did it spring from the previous motion? How long has it been building towards this, and how can I predict what will come next? The 10 performers in this year's *Dance Card* season all gave 8 minute improvisations which varied dramatically in style and quality. Vicky Kapo scrawled chalk upon the floor while delivering a discomfiting rumination on a teenage

sexual assault of sorts, she eventually took up a microphone to sing a song and asked her audience whether all this was stepping outside the acceptable bounds of dance. Sheridan Lang, in a retro grey and orange cashier's outfit, gave a more conventional performance centring on the dancer measuring the various fragments of her own body. Lang made excellent use of the space in which she moved, demonstrating a fine sense of the relationship between performer and environment.

Luke Hockley's contribution was the simplest but most daring of those played out on opening night: a figure attempting to complete a sequence of 3 consecutive backflips, most of his time was spent in suspense, warming up, trying for one or 2 flips and mentally preparing the final motion. The work played upon ideas of failure more common in sports or in street performances.

New Yorker Bob Eisen was touted as the draw card of *The Dance Card*, but his performance was only a partial success. Crowned by a wild shock of coloured hair, he offered us a shuddering, spasmodic vagrant or street preacher, words spewing as erratically as his movements. Consciously devoid of technical sophistication, it was a kind of *art brut* of the body, the physical equivalent of automatic writing or speaking in tongues.

Lucy Guerin Company, *Aether*, choreographer Lucy Guerin; dancers Antony Hamilton, Byron Perry, Kirstie McCracken, Kyle Kremerskothen, Lee Serle; composer Gerald Mair; motion graphics design Michaela French; North Melbourne Town Hall, March 14-27

The *Dance Card* 2005, performers Bob Eisen, Helena Yuk, Vicky Kapo, Alice Cummins, Kimberley McInyre, Tim Harvey, Sheridan Lang, Bronwyn Ritchie, Luke Hockley, Sela Kiek; sound designer Mark Lang; lighting Nildas Pujana; *Dancehouse*, Melbourne, March 9-20

dancehouse 05

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