Unthinkable complexity:

dance, datascapes and the desire to connect in Lucy Guerin's *Aether*

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We sat here one day, and I remember we looked out at all these buildings, and were wondering what it would be like if all the communication that was going on was visible, almost in the air, what that would look like. **Lucy Guerin**[1]

Aether, a work by choreographer Lucy Guerin first presented at North Melbourne Town Hall Arts House in 2005, is designed to reflect the texture, timing and rhythms of contemporary communication, the feeling of being bombarded by information from television, telephone, fax and internet in an increasingly media-saturated world. The term aether refers, as Guerin told *The Age*'s Robin Usher at the time, 'to the old description of the contents of space before Einstein's theories made it redundant'.[2] In a contemporary context, it is aligned with the concept of cyberspace, as a complex, networked space across which data, information and desire flow. *Aether* raises questions about our desire, and our capacity, to communicate across the networked spaces of the modern world. It casts communication as a difficult, painful, yet still somehow innately human process. Moreover, while Guerin did not want *Aether* to become 'too self-referential, and all about how we speak to our audiences',[3] she does allow a subset of ideas about the difficulties of communicating through contemporary dance to run throughout the piece too.

Watching *Aether*, I was intrigued by the way Guerin chose to negotiate these ideas choreographically. Like several of Guerin's major works – *Melt* (2002), or *Heavy* (1998), for instance – *Aether* sets up a tension, or a dialogue, between two contrasting states, in two contrasting sections.[4] In the first section, the dancers' bodies combine with data projections, starkly lit spaces and driving sounds to depict clusters of data in the air, in the aether. Designed to make data states tangible onstage, this first section of *Aether* has the cerebral, conceptual qualities characteristic of Guerin's style,[5] in which dancers regularly represent abstract states rather than 'a character or a human being pretending to be something'.[6] It is also firmly grounded in the 'strong, fearless movement [with] a certain quirky isolation and articulation of the joints'[7] that critics like Lee Christofis[8] and Jonathan Marshall[9] have associated with a 'Melbourne aesthetic' in the work of Guerin, Chunky Move's Gideon Obarzanek, and Balletlab's Phillip Adams. In the second section of *Aether*, though, the complexity is peeled away, as the dancers move to a still, silent space in which they use gibberish and gestural language to try to connect in meaningful ways. This peeling away of layers of information is more difficult for audiences to negotiate than the initial movement sequence. Certainly, it complicated my own reading of *Aether*. I found the movement compelling in both parts. But my initial reaction at an intellectual level was that *Aether*'s structure set up a nostalgic metanarrative about physical presence as a necessary ground for communication. I wondered about the 'big picture' Guerin

Lucy Guerin Inc's 'Aether'
Photo: Rachelle Roberts,
Dancers:
Kyle Kremerskothen,
Antony Hamilton,
Kirstie McCracken,
Byron Perry and
Lee Serle

was presenting. Was she progressively stripping the technology away to suggest this was the path back to a purer communicative state? And thus simply confirming cultural anxieties about communication technologies, confirming our unthinking acceptance that meaningful human interaction occurs by means of bodies and language, not machines? It was the humour, sadness and unsatiated desire of the dancers' effort to connect via language at the end of *Aether* – as confronting and imperfect a communicative mode for the dancers as the technologies – that eventually challenged this initial reaction. As Guerin says, she prefers abstraction,[10] but accepts that it is difficult to forestall the intrusion of narratives like the one I was contemplating into her work. 'None of it is particularly narrative,' she says. 'But... I think when you watch dance it's quite difficult not to try to construct a narrative, because it's human bodies is the medium you're looking at. Whereas if you look at a painting and it's abstract it's just colours, you don't feel like you have to bring it back to some story'.[11] 'Concern regarding the reception of embodied abstraction is,' therefore, as Marshall suggests, 'a major anxiety which Guerin and her peers continue to negotiate'.[12] Guerin's challenge is to work with bodies without drawing fixed conclusions for her audience.[13] Which, according to Marshall, is why Guerin's works usually use a 'dialectic'[14] structure. They show characters, characteristics or states the audience can identify with, but also alienate or fragment these states in some way – by counterposing them with more abstract, minimal or formalised movement, for instance. Her goal is not to reconcile these conflicting qualities, but to bring them into relief, to begin to deconstruct them.

In this paper, I use a close analysis of *Aether* to unpack the ways in which Guerin uses the dualistic, dialectic structure Marshall[15] has compared with poststructuralist deconstruction through binary series to work with, within and against her 'audiences' voracious appetite for narrative'.[16] That is, to present

recognisable states without allowing narrative to overpower the work, or impose too narrow a range of interpretative possibilities on it. I suggest this choreographic strategy does, in the case of *Aether* at least, allow her to stage compelling images of the complexities of contemporary communication, whilst at the same time forestalling a culturally recuperative reading of the piece as a lament for the physical presence accessible in life, and in the live performing arts, but not in the cyber world.

Aether

In *Aether*, Guerin makes the chaotic tangle of data, information and desire that circulates through contemporary communication technologies – television, telephone, fax and internet, as well as face-to-face, flesh-to-flesh contact – tangible onstage.

As the spectators take their seats, five dancers – Anthony Hamilton, Kyle Kremerskothen, Kirstie McCracken, Byron Perry and Lee Serle – sit splay-legged amidst s-shaped streams of shredded newspaper, silently picking at them. They fall flat, the lights fade, and a ringing, staticky soundscape signals the start of the piece. The dancers are suddenly immersed in a dense, multimedia datascape. Images, lines, digits, snippets of misconnected chat, colours and circles are projected over their bodies, over a screen at the back, and out to the sides of the space.[17] In this section of *Aether*, 'the dancers aren't necessarily representing humans or characters, they're more [particles,] part of this big web of interconnected messages and impulses'.[18] '[H]eads shaven, clad in billowy shifts of a neutral hue,' they are, as reviewer John Bailey says, 'genderless clones, lacking individuality'.[19]

The dancers' movements are sharp, strangely angled, and strangely articulated. They are at the mercy of signals passing through them – at first through jittery, prodding, probing fingers and hands that extend out from their bodies like antennae or electrodes,[20] and then through their whole bodies, producing pivoting spins that throw their limbs about, the momentum pushing them to and fro, together and apart, across the grids marked on the floor. The choreography builds into more complicated linkages, transitioning, as Stephanie Glickman says, 'from prodding duets, and folding, collapsing bodies to a linking chain of thrashing rolls and falls against a numbing soundscape of bleeps and keyboard chatter'.[21] The dancers shuffle, twist, turn, lift and leap around each other, transmitting ideas and impulses. At times, though, the impulses passing through their bodies seem to get stuck, as though they are bits of data caught between two movements, between two film frames or pixels as Guerin puts it.[22] They start to look like stuttery little mechanical toys, an impression compounded by the appearance of a row of false, foreshortened shadows or simulacra of their bodies on the back wall at one stage.

Guerin says she was trying to create her own aesthetic in the first part of *Aether*, 'rather than it being referenced to pop culture or ideas [about cyberspace] in movies'.[23] Still, it did remind me of Gibson's characterisation of cyberspace in *Neuromancer*, '[a] graphical representation of data abstracted from the banks of every computer in the human system. Unthinkable complexity. Lines of light, ranged in the non-space of the mind, clusters and constellations of data'.[24] The unthinkable complexity of this first section of *Aether* is designed to reflect the datascapes of daily life, information overload, impossible to take it all in.[25]
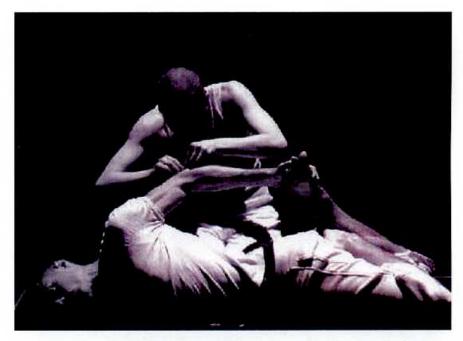
Spectators are forced to find 'a pathway through this dense mass of data',[26] to make choices, as in life, about 'what is most meaningful or of interest to us from the vast communications we receive through media, press, internet and email'.[27] As in life, the temptation to limit the complexity, limit the choices to a smaller scale, to the movements we know how to see and interpret, is strong. A sense both of life's complexity, and of our ways of managing that complexity, comes to the fore.

Then, suddenly, the media-saturated complexity starts to disappear. The soundscape is softer and less dense. The screen is withdrawn. The space is dark but for a narrow line of light along the back wall. The dancers lie beneath it, sending heads, hands, arms and legs up into it, casting partial, truncated shadows. Serle's head appears in a square of light, and, while the others swiftly, violently sweep all the newspaper aside, he speaks to us, telling us what is happening,[28] and how the dancers feel about the 'dazzling array of unconventional methods', including voice, they will use to try to communicate in the next section. At this point, the self-reflexivity of *Aether*, as a commentary on communication in contemporary dance, as well as in other spheres, becomes apparent.[29]

'Good evening ladies and gentlemen, and welcome to tonight's performance of *Aether*, a glorious evening of modern dance. I hope you have enjoyed what you have seen so far. My name is Lee and I am twenty-three years old. In the first half of this show I performed the role of a particle, and in the second half I'll be attempting to communicate with my fellow dancers using a dazzling array of unconventional methods. The other performers here tonight are Anthony, Kirstie, Byron and Kyle. Kirstie is the only girl, apart from Lucy the choreographer, who is also a woman. Kirstie says that the part she finds most confronting is the conversation section which you will see coming up soon. We all have to make noises, and she thinks that guys are generally better at that stuff than girls, and she feels a bit naf. Kyle has told me he has counted about 23 transitions in the first half of the show. He is relating these transitions to connections he makes with strangers on the tram. He is very thoughtful. Anyway, I'm glad that you've come to see our show. It's not long to go now, just have to get rid of some newspaper and we can get on with it. You can think of it as a slow clearance of communication debris from your life.'[30]

This comic, self-referential commentary on dance, the 'language' of dance, and the ability of dance to communicate with audiences, foreshadows a change in tone in the next section of *Aether*. In this section, the texture, rhythm and relationships shift. There is still a strong focus on the impulse, or the desire, to speak, communicate and make connections with others, be it a single person, or a small group.[31] But the layers have been stripped back, and the dancers have become human beings trying to make connections. The 'dazzling array of unconventional methods' they use to make connections consists of gibberish and gestural language. Guerin has not used vocals before, but because 'saying something' is the simplest form of communication, it seemed right to explore it in *Aether*. 'It came out of the subject matter. Often that's the way it works for me'.[32] It did call for a more task-driven choreographic mode, though. 'The way we made that material,' Guerin says, 'was from the impulse to speak. I'd ask the dancers to attempt, at the moment they were about to speak, to somehow

Lucy Guerin Inc's 'Aether'
Photo: Rachelle Roberts,
Dancers:
Kirstie McCracken and
Kyle Kremerskothen

subvert that, and make it a movement. Which was really quite tortuous for them, I think'.[33] While Guerin liked learning 'what dancers could do in that context, with movement, and vocalisation',[34] it was, as Searle's speech attested, a more confrontational communicative mode, for some at least of the dancers.

The second half of *Aether* is simpler than the first.[35] It is dominated by a series of duets 'in which the dancers communicate through garbled or squeaking voices'.[36] Guerin says 'I didn't want it to be about choreography, or structure, just much more about these duets and the attempts to connect'.[37] In the first 'vacuum cleaner' duet, Perry's hand hovers over parts of Kremerskothen's body, sucking, tossing and turning him in a pile of newspaper. In the second, Kremerskothen and McCracken toss and turn each other, entangled on the floor, then in the air, first him leading, then her. In the third – which grew out of Perry and Hamilton's tendency to use silly gestures to hold the channels of communication between them open while rehearsing – the two sit downstage in newspaper hats and ties, pulling faces, pointing at each other, parroting each other. It is, as Bailey says, 'interesting to see eyes, or more accurately eyelines, given a more prominent position'[38] in this part of *Aether*, the dancers seeing each other, and the audience, for the first time. In time, all five dancers are drawn into a giggling, grunting, squeaking movement sequence, which leaves Perry and Kremerskothen sitting at right angles, rocking, sobbing, muttering softly.

The sadness carries through to the next sequence, as Hamilton performs an exhausting, impassioned routine for the other dancers who, despite his efforts, stay totally disengaged. At one point in this 'extravagant aria of frustration for body and voice'[39] he lurches forward, grabs and spins Serle, but the 'represented' audience remains passive all the way through, provoking peals of laughter from the 'real' audience at this bizarre interaction. Here, again, *Aether's* underlying commentary on contemporary dance as a communicative mode is strong. Hamilton's performance is 'a personal thing for me,' Guerin says, 'about the difficulty of trying to make a work, and how does it reach audiences, and how do they respond, and in the end maybe it's only the tiny little thing that is going to

make it across the channel'.[40] *Aether* ends with a stilted, stuttery duet from Hamilton and McCracken, the movement pared down to McCracken's finger, this small movement symbolising for Guerin the importance of the message that might make it through the channels, through the massive influx of information.[41]

Guerin's choreographic approach in *Aether*

Two main things interest me about Guerin's choreographic strategy in *Aether*.

The first is the way *Aether* negotiates a century-long concern with a new technology, new media and mediatization in the live arts. It is, of course, a concern that began as far back as the turn of the twentieth century, as the destabilising force of military, scientific and communication technologies fractured long held 'truths' in both social and artistic spheres. In the case of the live arts, the impact was compounded by cinema's remediation[42] of live performance, which, as Philip Auslander says, seemed to threaten its viability and made some fearful the auratic art object would be overrun by mass-produced forms.[43] As the twentieth century progressed, artists responded to mechanization, mediatization, in a range of ways – from Meyerhold's biomechanical work with bodies as machines, to body artists like Acconci's return to the materiality of the body, to Stelarc's augmentation of his body with machines, to Cunningham's computer generated dance, to companies like the Wooster Group that re-remediate technology back into live performance, reducing, in Auslander's terms, the ontological distinction between the two.[44] What is interesting about *Aether*'s intervention into this debate is that it shows the body as technology, shows the body as mediated, constructed and constrained by technology, and, at the same time, shows multiple communication 'technologies' – computers, gestures, gibberish languages – producing the same set of problems with 'being understood'. As *Aether* progresses, it becomes clear that the computer gadgetry of the first section, and the gibberish of the second, are both 'technologies' that make us speak, move and tell our stories in specific ways (as McLuhan[45] suggested when he said the medium is the message), provoking anxieties about being oneself, and being understood. The concern that lack of flesh-to-flesh contact today alienates us from the social networks that once sustained us, in a cyber realm where identity is subject to play, trickery and subversion,[46] is contextualised in terms of a long line of anxieties about new technologies. *Aether* pushes past this anxiety at new cultural forms. It refuses to find a redemptive power in face-to-face, flesh-to-flesh contact over communication technologies. It refuses, as Auslander might articulate it, to find a fundamental ontological difference between these forms of communication. A refusal that is important both in the context of *Aether*'s reflection on contemporary communication, and its reflection on communicating with an audience, undercutting the idea that a show's aura, its ability to get a message across, or, in Peggy Phelan's[47] more recent formulation, its ability to become a site of social subversion, is irrevocably tied to it being one-off, face-to-face, flesh-to-flesh.

The second thing that interests me is the way *Aether*'s ability to push past conventional cultural anxieties is tied to the switch in style between the sections. Guerin 'wanted a complete change'[48] between the two halves of *Aether*. But this

progression was not about constructing a narrative move towards a 'purer' communicative state. It was, rather, to offer two different perspectives,[49] two different images of a given conceptual terrain. Guerin wanted to create an interplay between different, even contradictory, images – communication mediated by technology, and communication mediated by language. It is not the logic and denial structure of a traditional philosophical dialectic. But it is a dialectic, or a binary deconstruction of sorts, as Marshall suggested, using the dualism to think through a conceptual terrain – or, given the visceral quality of Guerin's choreography, to feel through it. It is designed to draw out assumptions about both 'terms', to destabilise both terms, and the relationships between them, and thereby deconstruct the whole conceptual terrain. This helps Guerin open things out, pushing audiences to think things they haven't thought before,[50] without pushing a preferred set of possibilities. 'I think in most of my pieces I don't try to draw conclusions, it's more questions,'[51] she says.

Throughout the two contrasting parts of *Aether*, the desire to communicate is there, the impulse is there. But the language does no more than the technologies to guarantee 'true' connections with others, or with unknowable parts of oneself. Face-to-face conversation might be the most prominent form of communication, 'and the one that we are best at,' Guerin says,'... [b]ut it has its limitations too'.[52] 'You know what you want to say, but you can't always say it'.[53] '[T]here's a desire to connect, but you can't always understand. We are individual creatures, and so complex ...There are certain parts of other people that we just can't really get to'[54] Hence the images of 'isolation, futility and diffidence'[55] throughout *Aether*. However, Guerin says, 'I don't think it's all completely negative'.[56] 'Communication is still difficult'[57]. 'But the attempt to do it can be a very moving thing'.[58]

The dialectic choreographic structure Guerin works with in *Aether* is, she admits, 'a lot to ask of an audience'.[59] It tends to polarise people, she says.[60] They like one half, or the other, like contemplating the intricate choreography in the first half, or laughing at the comic attempts at connection in the second half.[61] For critics like Bailey[62] and Christofis,[63] the second part of *Aether* charted new and compelling territory. For Chloe Smethurst, by contrast, it was 'a series of disjointed physical-theatre type skits'[64], 'too slow, awkwardly directed and overly long'.[65] As these comments show, Guerin's audiences can find it difficult 'to look at it more as a whole',[66] 'so the two halves make sense in relation to each other'.[67] But this difficulty seems to me to be necessary to her work, which relies on tensions in its structure to give audiences a nuanced take on the human states she explores, in which meaning is still being negotiated, forestalling the intrusion of closed and culturally recuperative narratives about the way communication technologies impact on human relationships.

NOTES

1 Lucy Guerin, personal interview, 28 November 2006.
2 Robin Usher, 'Projecting messages with meaning', *The Age*, 15 March 2005, *Metro*, 4.
3 Lucy Guerin, personal interview, 28 November 2006.
4 cf. Jonathan Marshall, 'Documents in Australian Postmodern Dance: two interviews with Lucy Guerin', *Australasian Drama Studies*, 41 (2003), 104, 110, 112; cf. Phillipa Rothfield, 'Expectation and Revelation', *RealTime*, 52, December/January 2003.
5 Lee Christofis has suggested Guerin's work can in fact sometimes seem 'too dry, too

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cerebral' (quoted in Vicki Fairfax, 'Dancing Through Chaos', *The Australian*, 14 March 2005, 13).

6 Guerin, quoted in Marshall, p. 113

7 Fairfax, p. 13.

8 Lee Christofis, 'Present Tense', *The Australian*, 8 April 2006, *Review*, 16.

9 Marshall pp. 103, 104, 113, 116.

10 Cf. Guerin quoted in Jonathan Marshall, 'Documents in Australian Postmodern Dance: two interviews with Lucy Guerin,' *Australasian Drama Studies*, 41 (2003), 106, 109.

11 Lucy Guerin, personal interview, 28 November 2006.

12 Marshall p. 118.

13 Lucy Guerin, personal interview, 28 November 2006.

14 Marshall p. 103.

15 Marshall pp. 103-4.

16 Guerin quoted in Marshall, p. 109.

17 Guerin has since stopped using the side panels that allowed projections to spill out to the side of the space.

18 Lucy Guerin, personal interview, 28 November 2006.

19 John Bailey, 'Bodies as signals, nodes, networks', *RealTime, 67*, June-July 2005, n.pag. Available online <www.realtimearts.net/rt67/bailey_guerin.html>

20 Ibid.

21 Stephanie Glickman, '*Aether*', *The Herald-Sun*, 18 March 2005, 85.

22 Lucy Guerin, 'A Few Notes on *Aether*', *Aether* Program, 2005.

23 Lucy Guerin, personal interview, 28 November 2006.

24 William Gibson, *Neuromancer* (New York: Ace Books, 1984), p. 51.

25 Guerin quoted in Usher, p. 4.

26 Lucy Guerin, personal interview, 28 November 2006.

27 Lucy Guerin, 'A Few Notes on *Aether*', *Aether* Program, 2005.

28 Lucy Guerin, personal interview, 28 November 2006.

29 cf. Bailey, n.pag.

30 Lee Searle, *Aether*, North Melbourne Town Hall Arts House, March 2005.

31 Lucy Guerin, personal interview, 28 November 2006.

32 Ibid.

33 Ibid.

34 Ibid.

35 Usher p. 4.

36 Bailey, n.pag.

37 Lucy Guerin, personal interview, 28 November 2006.

38 Bailey n.pag.

39 Lee Christofis, 'Graphic Display Dazzles Senses', *The Australian*, 17 March 2005, 14.

40 Lucy Guerin, personal interview, 28 November 2006.

41 Ibid.

42 A term Jay David Bolter and Richard Grusin use to describe 'the representation of one medium in another' ('Remediation', *Configurations*, 3 (1996), 339) which Marshall McLuhan argued was part of all media innovation (*Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man* (London: Art Paperbacks, 1987) p. 8).

43 Phillip Auslander, *Liveness: Performance in a mediatized culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1999), pp. 33-4, 50.

44 Auslander pp. 4-7, 39-41, 45, 51.

45 McLuhan p. 13.

46 Allucquère Rosanne Stone, *The War of Desire and Technology at the Close of the Mechanical Age* (Cambridge MA and London: The MIT Press, 1995), pp. 180-1.

47 Peggy Phelan, *Unmarked: The Politics of Performance* (New York and London: Routledge, 1993) p. 146.

48 Lucy Guerin, personal interview, 28 November 2006.

49 Ibid.

50 Ibid.

51 Ibid.

52 Ibid.

53 Ibid.

54 Ibid.

55 Christofis, 'Graphic Display Dazzles the Senses', p. 14.

56 Lucy Guerin, personal interview, 28 November 2006.

57 Ibid.

58 Ibid.

59 Ibid.

60 Ibid.

61 Ibid. While Guerin works with comedy here, she says she was initially disconcerted by the comedy people found in some of her choreography (cf. Guerin quoted in Marshall 2003, p. 107).

62 Bailey, n.pag.

63 Christofis, 'Graphic Display Dazzles the Senses', p. 14.

64 Chloe Smethurst, 'Complications of contemporary communication', *The Age*, 21 March 2005, *Metro*, 9.

65 Ibid.

66 Lucy Guerin, personal interview, 28 November 2006.

67 Ibid.