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Preprint deposited in [CURVE](#) March 2014

Original citation:

Pollard, Niki , Garrett Brown, N. , Kipp, Christian and Voris, Amy (2012) Everything is at once: Reflections on embodied photography and collaborative process. *Journal of Dance & Somatic Practices* , volume 3 (1-2): 75-84

DOI: 10.1386/jdsp.3.1-2.75_1

Publisher:

Intellect

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everything is at once: Reflections on embodied photography and collaborative process

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Christian Kipp and Niki Pollard, independent artists

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Abstract

Through an interview by his co-collaborators, dance artists Natalie Garrett Brown and Amy Voris, this interview explores the photographic process of Christian Kipp, landscape and dance photographer, as he reflects on his experience of working on the Enter & Inhabit project. The questions asked by Garrett Brown and Voris were generated through movement and reflective writing in response to the photographic collection exhibited as part of the 2011 Dance and Somatic Practice Conference, Coventry, UK. In particular, the article explores the interrelationship between the somatic-informed movement practices and performance score creation of Garrett Brown and Voris and the sensorial play of Kipp's photography. Co-authored by Garrett Brown, Kipp and Voris, this collection of questions and responses seeks to continue rather than merely document the Enter & Inhabit project.

Keywords

photography

environment

embodiment

collaboration

performance

Body-Mind Centering®

Figure 1: Photo Christian Kipp.

Introduction

As part of the 2011 Dance and Somatic Practices Conference, Coventry, UK, Enter & Inhabit collected a photographic exhibition entitled *everything is at once*. The collection was created as part of an ongoing collaborative site project: Enter & Inhabit¹.

Enter & Inhabit explores our changing experiences of the outdoor spaces that we pass through. Using durational movement improvisation, photography and writing, Enter & Inhabit explores presence in sites of flow and transition. This project is underpinned by an interest in the different modes of perception invoked for the audience by somatic-informed movement practices, specifically Body-Mind Centering®.² This activity recognizes and foregrounds intersubjectivity as a state of being, and explores how embodied population of sites can invoke new and the yet-to-be known encounters of familiar space and place.³

In January 2011, Enter & Inhabit began a project in Kenilworth Common, Warwickshire, UK. In these woods – a popular thoroughfare local to our homes – we are beginning to translate processes from previous sites and projects, further afield. Interests in the

processes of sensory perception and the shifting textures of the seasons are feeding into our scores for the site.

The images in the photographic exhibition shown as part of the conference emerged from the ongoing project process, which involves inhabiting space and place, through a practice of staying open to the present. Through simple camera movements, the colours and textures of the woodland merge and layer. Created from and by the site, existing forms are transformed into images that are abstract and familiar. Characterized by a sensorial playfulness, the resulting images are not the place, the dancer or the dance, but are something parallel, folding back into collaboration with the site and each other. The images selected for the exhibition (a sample of which is included here) seem to gently resonate with the outdoor movement practices being explored.

Continuing and developing our collaborative practice, the photographic collection for the conference was collectively selected. The process took place over an extended period, sometimes in real time and space in and near to the environment, and sometimes virtually. Words and associations experienced by Garrett Brown and Voris from their first encounter with the photographic images fed back into subsequent movement explorations and scores on site. The spatial arrangements for the photographic collection emerged from a play with the exhibition site as environment, with an attentiveness to the architecture and light of the space.

Intrigued by the dialogue that was emerging around the photographic process during the creation of the exhibition, Garrett Brown and Voris explored moving in response to the image ‘environment’ to generate questions on process for Kipp. Drawing on the approaches to somatically informed movement improvisation and reflective writing used in their outdoor practice, Garrett Brown and Voris honed their curiosities as invitations to Kipp to further articulate his particular approach to photography.

And thus in this co-authored article exploring the place of touch in an embodied approach to photography we also find an extension of our collaboration, a writing process and resulting text that moves between a reflection on practice, a documentation of the exhibition and a continuation of the project, or perhaps an experiment in a shared writing space.

Figure 2: Photo Christian Kipp.

How would you describe the photographic process behind the images included in the photographic collection for the conference?

All of the images were created during a single session while walking through the site... not a time when I would typically photograph – that is, while walking and talking. The images are created through movement of the camera during a single exposure. The movements range from gentle sweeping motions to quite frantic shaky motion. These images have had and still do have quite an odd effect on me in that it is quite different to my usual way of working which might be described as slow and ‘thoughtful’. This

collaboration seems to facilitate or to allow me to try out new approaches.

The process has a strange mix of embracing the seemingly random creations that come from letting go of the carefully composed image – with the question of how random they really are, or can be. During post-processing (the stage between the images being made in the camera and being ready to print), there is actually very little manipulation, mainly just in colour and contrast.

How do 'the senses' feed into your image-making process?

Rather than looking for something or seeking an image, I try to be in a state of awareness that naturally involves all the senses. This makes it easier to follow a particular attention, like 'I wonder what I will notice next' – maybe the sound of a bird in the undergrowth or a certain branch. This may then lead to concentrating on something in a more detailed way and then composing that into an image.

Figure 3: Photo Christian Kipp.

How do you relate to the sense of touch, or the tactility of the environment, when you are photographing?

Generally, I feel that my sense of touch is experienced through my eyes, as textures and shapes are felt through seeing, and also through my feet. I tend to avoid manipulation or disturbance of the environment.

The more I have worked with movement artists, especially in this collaboration, the more I am aware of my connection to the ground and movement over it: how my weight is distributed, the feeling of the environment through the feet and the speed at which I change direction. Maybe the sense of touch is expanded to a sense of the whole body rather than just the hands, as these are always holding the camera. This collaboration has seen me lie horizontally in the environment, so sensing the ground through other body surfaces and moving away from the usual position of seeing and sensing from an upright perspective.

Some years ago I attended a workshop led by a landscape photographer who I'd come across through an interview. John Wimberley⁴ talked about how he approached the whole act of being in the landscape and this really struck a chord with me. The approach of his workshop was the idea of dropping expectation when going out to photograph and rather going into the environment, openly and without judgment. He talked about having 'soft-eyes' and using peripheral vision, a quality of seeing which doesn't often arise when 'seeking' something. This more meditative way of being in an environment felt very right to me and has since become more and more of the way I work. Particularly photographing in the landscape leads to everything becoming the practice: getting 'there', walking, sitting, having lunch. The photographing comes out of *being in the environment*. In both this and another collaboration, I may go into the environment without the camera and I would say I am still in my practice, as the senses are being fed and images are being created, just not by the camera.

How would you describe the movement practices being explored?

I think the movement practices have an unselfconsciousness about them while at the same time standing out. Just the act of practicing movement in the open seems to draw attention to itself. The kinds of environments we inhabit means that my awareness of the movement is sporadic: I come across it suddenly, or see it disappear around a corner or over a hill, or blend into the background as my attention shifts slightly to something else.

The movement seems to emerge from the site, rather than using the environment as a 'platform' for movement. The use of scores to prompt and guide the movement practices intrigues me: I only know a little about the ideas being attended to, yet become interested in them and the movement that somehow emanates from them. This is not how I seem to work (probably shying away from taking preconceived structures into the environment), though the use of scores seems to offer a structure/framework while also seeming to be freeing. The varying use of dialogue, hands-on work and scores seems to feed into and open up possibilities for movement.

Figure 4: Photo Christian Kipp

How do you feel that your practice relates to the movement practices being explored?

How and why does movement/the body inform your work?

The first part of this seems almost impossible to answer in any precise way; I even ask myself something similar at times during the collaboration. The more I spend time around these movement practices, the more I listen to them being discussed, the more I

become interested. If the senses are truly feeding into the process, which I think they are, then listening, seeing and sometimes participating in the movement practices will also be feeding into the image-making process. It follows that the same would be happening in the other direction. The question of ‘why’ it relates, perhaps not surprisingly, has a circular answer: it informs my work because it interests me more and more, and this flows back into how it relates. The more one is aware and interested in something, the more it seems to feed into other areas of existing interest: a positive feedback loop. It feels more present to follow that process than to try to understand how it started.

Are there times when the movement practices being explored do not resonate or make you uncomfortable in some way?

There can be times when the dialogue about the movement practices can lead my attention to drift away. This is unrelated to content as such, I think, but rather that my own practice contains much less discussion: I read, watch and listen a lot, but dialogue is mostly absent. It can sometimes be easy for me to think that talking is distancing from the actual practice. However, I also recognize that my practice can be narrow, on the level of engagement with other methods, practices and disciplines. This is a clear reason why collaborative processes are so inspiring for me. It is important to be reminded that people practice in very different ways and that an overlap between these practices is not always a necessity for collaboration, but rather something that is in constant flow.

Figure 5: Photo Christian Kipp.

Could you describe how the two broad areas of photography that you work in – ‘landscape’ and ‘dance’ – feed into each other?

It took some time for me to even realize that the two areas can and do feed into each other. I had previously regarded them as quite separate. It seems that the strong compositional focus of nature photography finds its way into the dance imagery, especially when there is more than one artist in the frame. While the choreography has its own composition, the camera frame allows a recomposition, or an alternative view. Interestingly, both my current collaborations with movement artists involve working in the landscape, so the two areas have begun to combine.

I find that the dance work has helped me ‘to trust the process’ more, while the calmness required for more solitary, meditative landscape work can be very useful in dance work that sometimes necessarily occurs at a quicker pace and within a limited time frame.

How would you characterize the relationship between the different kinds of projects that you do?

The relationship between my projects seems to be that they support and balance each other. The solo photography trips I make are very much about quietly inhabiting the landscape (often camping). Working in collaboration with other artists offers a counterbalance to this more ‘solitary’ process. Working with or even just alongside someone else who is deeply engrossed in their practice provides a catalyst and a support for my own, and hopefully theirs too. The added dimension of dialogue provides something that is missing when I am working on my own. It can seem easier to establish

a momentum of practice when working in collaboration. I'm also aware that even in my collaborative projects, I can sometimes still feel as though I am working in quite a solitary way: maybe more alongside than with the other. It is interesting to me that nature itself, as the key area of my 'solitary' practice, has also become part of my collaborative projects. I wonder, then, whether I seek out others with similar areas of interest (e.g. nature), or whether they just work their way into the projects?

The notions of depth and surface seem to be a 'feature' of your work – could you say more about this?

Many photographers have said that they photograph to see or learn how they see the world. I think that makes sense for any artist. Abstracting details or photographing something in such a way that the greater context is lost can lead to images that may appear more as surfaces, while the resulting concentration of attention into these surfaces may start to imply depth. This seems to be a thread running through many of my photographs, even those that aren't so abstract. Maybe I perceive this depth (perhaps subconsciously) at the time of 'taking' the image and then 'make' it more perceptible in the resulting photograph (in the same way as negative to print or score to performance). Depth and surface of course also seem to be opposites, so if both are present then this may lend a sense of mystery to the photograph, or at least this is what I would hope for.

Figure 6: Photo Christian Kipp.

References

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Contributor details

Natalie Garrett Brown currently lectures in Dance at Coventry University, where she is Associate Head of Performing Arts. She is associate editor of the *Journal of Dance and Somatic Practices*, and is on the editorial board for the Dancelines section in *Research in Dance Education*. She has just completed her Somatic Movement Educators Training in Body-Mind Centering[®] with Embody Move Association. Her research interests are theoretically situated within feminist understandings of embodied subjectivity, and are focused on the ways in which somatic practices inform performance-making, creativity and writing.

Christian Kipp is a photographer based in Essex. He splits his time between working on his own in the natural landscape and collaborating with a variety of dance artists. He is interested in the ways that these two areas feed and reflect each other. For Christian, photography feels like a way of connecting more strongly with nature and people.

Niki Pollard was a Dartmoor-based dance artist and scholar. Her dance and writing work included postgraduate teaching and projects in schools and community settings. She

recently completed training in environmental movement practice with Helen Poynor, and was on the editorial board for the *Journal of Dance and Somatic Practices*. For tributes to Niki by members of the dance community, please see *Journal of Dance & Somatic Practices*, Volume 2.2 and http://www.rescen.net/archive/n_pollard.html

Amy Voris is a dance artist based in the West Midlands and is Assistant Organizer for Decoda/Summer Dancing in Coventry. Her current practice is inspired by Authentic Movement and by collaboration with other artists. She currently teaches at Coventry University and has recently completed training in Integrative Bodywork and Movement Therapy with Linda Hartley.

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Notes

¹ Begun in 2008 by dance artists Garrett Brown and Voris, principally as a site-responsive movement project in the city landscape of Coventry, the project has subsequently evolved to include photographer Christian Kipp and, until her recent passing, dancer/writer Niki Pollard.

² For an introduction to this practice, see Cohen (1993) and Hartley (1989).

³ An ongoing engagement with the work and practice of movement artist Helen Poynor supports and informs the work of Enter & Inhabit.

⁴ www.johnwimberleyphotography.com

Best known for his photograph *Descending Angel*, he mostly recently spent ten years photographing ancient Native American petroglyphs, culminating in a self-published book *Evidence of Magic*.