

Optik Spaces

[This was written for Dance Theatre Journal. I hit on the idea of using past and present tense as a way of writing – as a spectator and a participant - about my own work.]

In the town square of Giessen Germany on a summer afternoon. About fifteen people are standing. Still. Looking calmly but intently ahead of them. The stillness is growing. Each person can move forward a pace or two if they want to. No-one does. Unlike these people I am the observer. I too am standing still but allow my head and body to turn and look at the whole scene and at each person in it. Each person is silent. Suddenly my sense of what is happening shifts utterly. Movement is everywhere. A curtain is moving in an upstairs window. The trees are swaying. The hair on one of the people standing a few metres from me is moving strand by strand. Sounds erupt from every corner of the square. Cars, footsteps, a dog barking, doors opening and shutting, birds singing - a cacophony. A small girl on a tricycle appears from round a corner and wheels into the square mapped out by standing still figures. The girl dodges first one then another, accepting the obstacles in her path as the natural way of things. Suddenly something about these people, or is that particular person she has stopped by, makes her take notice. Something is different about these adults. She spots first one, then another and another calm standing person. She is not afraid, but now intensely curious. She too is still, then slowly moves around the figures, looking at each one. She looks with great care, intently. Then something else catches her attention, the spell is broken. She speeds off. The whole episode lasted minutes, perhaps seconds, and felt like hours perhaps days or even longer.

As I watch the little girl disappear into the high street a movement catches my attention. I do not turn but sense this movement acutely, right at the edge of my field of vision. It is one of the standing figures now moving. The person comes to a standstill. Now I turn and look. They are perfectly still, rooted there as if always there. I cannot relate the movement that took them to there to the position they now occupy, but I am acutely aware that this person I am looking at is not where they were. As I look at the back of the

person standing there, the leaves of a bush they have half entered brushing their face and shoulders, I am filled with a longing for that person to turn and look directly at me, to be there just for me. They do not turn. I feel very close to this person although they are metres away from me. I want to move towards them, go right up to them. I do not move.

Stand and face forward. Look ahead of you. Keep your head still. What you can now see is what you look at. Observe as intently and precisely as you can. Observe what is directly ahead of you, and what catches your eye at the edge of your field of vision. Be acutely aware of what is in your vision and what is not.

When you want, move forward a few steps and come to a standstill. Keep looking. Observe changes to the detail in your visual field. Notice how this changes as you move. Keep the line and direction straight ahead of you. Let your weight release to the floor and keep the upper torso relaxed. When moving keep each step going forward. Keep balanced between each step. Move forward again when you want to. Come to a standing still. Wait. Observe. Listen. Listen especially to what you cannot see, what is behind you, behind the line of vision.

You can turn to your left or your right at a precise 90 degrees using your shoulders and hips as lines out. You can turn 180 degrees to face precisely the opposite direction. This is now your forwards direction. You have a completely different perspective. You can do any of these turns at any time. Keep looking at all times. Keep the head facing forwards and relaxed. The body turns and the head follows. You see what comes into your vision when the body turns. As you turn everything turns. You are at the centre.

I am sitting in the Cultural Centre's Studio Theatre in Warsaw. It is early winter. The seating has been arranged to create multi focus pools of empty space and pathways up, down and across the studio floor. There are some empty seats. Three performers are moving along the pathways open to them. Sometimes synchronously, together, sometimes two still, one moving, or one still and two moving. They are working independently of each other, but patterns are clear with a mathematical form: 1 + 1 + 1 or 1 + 2 / 2 + 1 or 3. Three together is a strong pattern with enormous energy: 3

standing still or 3 walking, running together on the same line, in the same direction. The sound of this movement begins to fill the senses: feet on floor, hands on wall, the different sounds of breathing. The listening becomes acute. This same listening picks up a different sound. Feet but singular in their rhythm. Determined and with a purpose - very different from the purpose-less sound of the three performers. My look seeks the sound, finds it. A young woman has left her seat and is walking tentatively towards another seat in a different part of the studio. Performers pass her by, momentarily blending with her own line and pace of movement. She reaches her new seat, turns and sits, her face elated, relaxed now. There is a completely different atmosphere in the studio. The watchers are no longer passive, inert, but they too are waiting, wanting. The moment arrives: another woman, older, gets up. She negotiates her way round seating and pathways to reach her goal, one of the performers. She walks alongside him. Then grasps his right hand, first with one then with both of her hands. She keeps up her walk with him which now has to twist on itself to maintain hold of the hand and keep the direction. She releases him. Turns round and walks back to her seat. I am sitting just behind her and am looking at her. She rummages in her bag and takes out a piece of chocolate. Offers some to her neighbour. Notices me looking at her. Twists round and offers some to me. I can hear a performer walking past my chair directly behind me. I accept the chocolate and keep it in my hand.

As you move forward concentrate on the distance between you and what ever is in front of you. If a performer or spectator or a wall is in front of you, and cannot be passed (always keep your line of forward movement straight ahead) then you can: turn at that point where you can go no further, or you can come to a stop. What is outside of you is not you, it is not related to you. The other (performer, wall) is independent of you as you are of it. Always accept and explore the nature of what is outside you but in contact with you. Contact is a decision about distance. You can turn at any point before you reach the critical point of stop or turn. If you turn 180 degrees what was in front of you has now gone. If you turn 180 degrees again it is in front of you. In this way something can appear and disappear as you turn and turn again. Explore the sameness and the

difference of appearing and re-appearing by repeating the movement and the turning many times.

A performance in Alexandria, Egypt. Early Spring. There are five spectators moving around the space with the three performers. They are all young, having fun, and showing it. A voice is becoming audible above the sound of the movement and the muffled din of the North African street. Another spectator is on her feet. She is standing in front of the percussion player. For some reason she wants him to stop playing. Stop it! Stop it! Finally she takes the rattle that is making the sound she so much wants to silence and holds it firm. Drummer and spectator are locked together, both holding the long cylinder of the rattle and looking at each other. I turn away to find the performers: everyone has gone. Through one of the open doors all eight have walked out of the theatre and into the noisy dark night outside. The rest of us sit and contemplate each other and the empty space in silence.

Two months later. I am watching this event on video. The camera had gone with the performers when they had left the theatre. It has found two of them, a performer sitting on a stone step, and in front of him, staring at him intently, one of the female spectators. It is dark. Neither are moving. In the distance I can hear the sound of the performance I am actually watching, a soft persistent drum beat and a baby making loud noises with its voice. In the film a stranger happens upon the couple at the steps. It is another young woman who stops and lets out a laugh. She approaches gingerly to get a closer look. Suddenly the spectating female breaks her stillness and pushes the other woman away forcibly, determinedly, before resuming her contemplation of the performer before her. The stranger has backed away, wary. But she is not going to leave. She looks from performer to spectator and back again. She lets out another laugh with a sudden jolt that contracts her stomach, her arms around herself, hugging her body. She waits. Suddenly the girl spectator has turned and is returning to the theatre. She doesn't look back. The performer is right behind her. The camera stays, looking at the stranger who is now alone, looking around her.

When aligning with another person remember that unlike an inanimate object, a person is dynamic. They can move forward, or away from you or stay where they are, in any sequence of these things, at any time. This dynamic potential belongs to you too of course. The relationship between you and other people in the space will be inter-active, non-linear, complex. But at any moment you are only concerned with your own position, your own possibilities. This is not achieved by closing down. At all times you must be as open and responsive as possible to the stimuli around you. Independence is hard.

Observe your alignment in relation to others using the grid lines: the one that runs directly ahead of you from your centre, and the other that runs from the centre again but outwards to your right and to your left.

Be aware of the pattern you are in, formed by the mathematics of 3, 2 + 1, 1 + 2. Work independently but do not work alone. If you stand still and the other two are moving you are creating the pattern of : 1 [still] + 2 [moving] . Wait. Observe. Listen. Explore this pattern. Just as your stillness is a proposition for the others to stop moving and become still, so the others' moving is a proposition for you to leave your stillness and move. There is no conflict here. You can do whatever you want, and whatever you do will be accepted by the others. The pattern is always looking for 3: 3 [moving] or 3[still]. This natural pull in the pattern can be used by you. You can resist it. Stay as 1 [still] in relation to the other's 2 [moving]. The 2 [moving] is resisting the pull to stillness. You are resisting the pull to 3 [moving]. If one of the 2 [moving] joins you to create 2 [still] then the pattern has changed completely to 2 [still] and 1 [moving]. Use this sense of patterning, and the resistance and going with its pull to explore your own dynamogenesis and resolutions, the beginnings of an impulse and its life cycle to decay and disappearance.

Berlin. Spring. A performance at Tacheles. I am observing a spectator on the opposite side of a space, some seats down from me. She is agitated, moving in her seat. Looking from side to side quickly and back to the something in the space that is occupying her whole attention. She gets up and places her hands on the shoulders of a performer who is running on the spot. She pushes down. She stops the running. As her hands leave, the

performer waits. She resumes her seat. The performer resumes running on the spot - the impulse has re-surfaced, not gone away. The spectator is caught now. She must give up or continue. Everyone waits. She decides to continue. She returns to the performer. A hand on each shoulder. The performer is tall. She has to reach up. She presses down. The performer accepts the contact. This give rise to an unexpected frisson of intimacy which catches her and us by surprise. The performer stops running. She releases but stands close, waiting. The performer waits. They wait together. Her head is lowered, looking at his feet. They are about to move again, shuffling and squeaking in one shoe for some reason. For the spectator this squeak has become the most irritable sound in the universe. It threatens to destroy her sense of reality, of when and where things should happen. She has to bring it and the person responsible, the performer, under control. A split second before the feet move again she has crouched down, grasped the shoes, and is untying the laces. She then ties them together again, locking the shoes together. A complete stranger, another spectator, races to the woman almost before she has time to stand up. He picks her up off the floor and carries her unceremoniously away. She is taken completely by surprise. She is yelling. The performer is trying to run forwards this time and is falling down at each attempt. Another spectator comes to untie the laces. I watch as people go back to their seats. I notice that the three performers are moving together in a line slowly down the space toward the far wall.

Move when you want to . Stand still when you want to. Try to separate the decision to move or stand still from the wanting to move or stand still. Wanting to move is recognition of an impulse to move. Executing the impulse into the space, or keeping the impulse internal is a decision. Desire and decision are different. Always accept the desire of the other. You cannot stop someone's desire, but you can explore creating a want or desire in another. You assume complete responsibility for what you want to do, and accept this condition for others. You are utterly independent, and yet not alone.

An orchard near Gardzienice, Poland. Early winter. It is morning. Misty, cold. There is one stranger present: a girl from Manchester who has joined the Gardzienice Theatre Association as a performer. Simon the percussion player is holding coats and shoes.

Terry is filming. I and the girl are watching. The performers are alone. A burnt crucifix dominates the orchard space. A small house used to be on this site but was destroyed by fire the previous year. The performers start to move, to create the patterns of three in the wide expanse of this Polish landscape. One performer sets off in the direction of a distant group of trees. On the way he passes branches which scratch his skin. Another lies face down in the damp frosty grass, while another walks up and down repeatedly between the crucifix and a tree. I watch the performer who is heading into the distance. There is no obstacle in his path. He keeps walking. I can hardly see him any more.

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