

## **Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund Report, 2014**

### **We're queer. We're.... where?**

#### **Adventures in LGBTQ culture and the hunt for elusive queer female physicalities in contemporary dance**

San Francisco. City of mists and mellow fruitiness. A mecca for seekers and makers of queer culture the world over. Not that London doesn't continue to liberate, stimulate and overwhelm with rich possibilities for self-invention or self-discovery, but recently I reached something of an impasse, struggling to reconcile what grasp I have of my queer identity with my experience as a dancer and dance maker. I hoped a period of research out of context, in San Francisco with its long history of LGBTQ vibrancy could help me find, if not clarity, at least a fuller perspective and some inspiration for new work. With the support of the Lisa Ullmann Travelling Scholarship Fund and the generosity of Swiss dance maker Eva Maria Küpfer, I participated in a residency at Oberlin Dance Collective's centre. Combining studio based research and cultural encounters across the city I tried to immerse myself in questions of gender and sexuality, creativity, collaboration and activism, hoping to emerge somewhat the wiser from the San Franciscan fog.

I am passionate and curious about the way in which gender and sexual identities shape and shift our physicalities and are shaped and shifted by them in return. However I was prompted into this period of research when I noticed a startling paucity of queer female visibility in UK contemporary dance, something all the more startling because it is insidious, my awareness of it crept up slowly, quietly. I realised while there had been an exciting and very welcome explosion of male gender and sexual expression in UK contemporary dance especially since the 1990s, the same cannot be said for women. In particular, there seems to be very little visibility of female masculinity or of open desire between women in dance. Female expression and embodiment is often oddly only ranges between the ultra feminine to the politely androgynous, the overtly heterosexual to the evasively ambiguous. These modes of expression are of course valid, important and often complex. However despite the scene being a relative haven of liberal, progressive attitudes, sophisticated expressions of female queerness remain elusive and possibly even unmissed by many. Smarting at this, I began to think about creating work around out of these issues myself but I soon realised a sense of queer female physicality in my own dancing was just as elusive. I struggle to locate myself, my physicality and my desires not just in the work I see around me, but also within the dance vocabularies I have myself embodied during my training and career, within the projects I work on and within the structures which facilitate them. I don't see much work I can relate to on this level and come up empty handed in my own efforts to find a register, a vocabulary, strategies that feel right for me. In other fields such as performance art, female queerness is alive and kicking. In dance male queerness is practically ubiquitous. So why is queer not here for women in UK contemporary dance? Is dance somehow an unappealing prospect for queer women? Do existing codes of training and practice gradually erode physical traces of unconventional femininities, or is it just me? How and why would I express my own gender and sexuality in

movement? What would that look like or feel like? What constitutes an identity or identities in the first place? Aren't we all continuously constructing and revealing our identities unconsciously anyway? Is it distorting to somehow make these processes explicit?

With these questions pecculating away I accepted a serendipitous invitation to join Eva Maria Küpfer during part of a five-month residency she was undertaking in San Francisco thanks to the City of Zurich. Eva and I are part of The Hunting Lodge, a self-organised European choreographic research collective. Together with six other young makers based in Spain, Italy, the Netherlands and Croatia, we meet periodically to create and explore choreographic methodologies, pool resources, share strategies, provide each other safe spaces to go out on a limb and develop ideas away from the need to produce finished products. Eva's generous offer enabled me the opportunity to base myself for a month in San Francisco, exploring the cultural life of the city and beginning to play with ideas both as part of our ongoing Hunting Lodge practice and as a way to undertake and digest my own research in this unique context. Unfortunately due to unexpected personal issues I was not able to stay for as long as I had planned, however the time I did spend there offered a rich and valuable experience both professionally and personally. What follows is a gathering together of some of my somewhat nebulous reflections.

### **The dance ghetto – economics, ethics and aesthetics of the mainstream vs the experimental**

One of the first things that struck me upon arriving in San Francisco was how far economics affect artistic practices. I was already aware that the sort of government arts funding we enjoy in the UK was not available in the US and this dictates a commercial bottom line for more conventional contemporary dance. I had heard that even in large US dance companies many dancers had nine to fives and rehearsed around their bread winning schedule, their dancing almost becoming a high-end hobby. Given this state of affairs, experimentation and notions of process might be limited. The small sample of more conventional work I saw (which may not, I admit, have been wholly representative) was sadly unsurprising: low-risk, glossy crowd pleasers, noticeably short on challenging expressions gender and sexuality. Here, even in a city groaning under the weight of diversity, the gender and sexual politics I had noticed in the dance scene at home were still present but further exaggerated by the local artistic status quo: male privilege and hetero-normativity prevailing alongside knowing, campy, cliché-heavy representations of male homosexuality passing as cheeky, comic or cutting edge.

The flipside is that this fosters a healthy and radical opposition amongst artists perhaps politically bolder than many of those found dancing in the UK. Oakland, just across the Bay Bridge from the city, has long been a hotbed of counterculture not least because artists who want to live off their art or embrace alternative lifestyles can rarely afford to live in the centre of San Francisco, swollen as it is with hipster tech innovators paying some of the highest rents in the country. From this scene I encountered some members of SALTA, a dance collective who make a mash-up of choreography, film, text and monthly dance parties. They embrace feminism,

collaboration and anti-capitalist models of creation and presentation. In curating and producing their regular mobile dance events, no money changes hands at all with everything being organised through borrowing, bartering and in kind donations. On the one hand their low-tech, hand made aesthetic not only makes a virtue out of their limitations, but it makes a political point. They firmly reject the art-as-product model and enjoy full artistic freedom as a result. They were fairly suspicious of the kinds of funding scenario I described enjoying because they argued that public money comes with populist strings. While I think they could get behind the Arts Council's desire for accessible art (as in easy to approach although rather than easy to understand), they are also champions of art for art's sake and wilfully obscure work. Their outsider position is not only a result of financial necessity, but a deliberate, defiant stance of resisting, critiquing and offering alternatives to oppressive norms.

Unfortunately I had to leave before seeing any of SALTA's work or the enormous new space, The Omni, shortly to be inhabited with a community of other artists and craftspeople. I wondered how they would tackle gender and sexuality, inspired as I was by their spirit of experimentation, openness, plurality and the strong whiff of activism. The Omni sounded like an all-encompassing utopia. However it is one in part made possible by the fact that many of the dancers had other non-dance jobs. I enjoy the fact that I can make my living from my art. While the agendas of the institutions funding myself and my peers may not be quite so progressive, I don't accept that they come from "The Man". Also I imagined it was mainly other Oaklanders and like-minded people already appreciative of their values who came to enjoy SALTA's events. If this is the case, what sort of change could they affect? I don't respect commercially driven projects, but neither do I believe in creating and performing in an alternative ivory tower.

Perhaps I am being unfair, and they too see a middle ground which I on a short visit couldn't glimpse. However this made me think about the tensions between arts that seek to mainstream the marginal, to transform or subvert norms by incorporating oppositional voices, and those that seek to maintain and even cultivate their marginalisation as a way to keep a vital critical distance from those norms. This has been a hot topic of debate in *Performing Gender*, a European project I am working on which commissions movement based work on gender and sexual identity in large-scale art galleries. This project unabashedly aims to bring the concerns, experiences and expressions of marginalised people to the mainstream with a view to normalising and destigmatising queer and feminist issues. However I realise attitudes towards this are also culturally contingent. Since some of the *Performing Gender* countries are generally quite conservative, the urgency to mainstream makes sense. Consider *Pride*. *Zagreb Pride*, only in its 12<sup>th</sup> year, is a relatively sombre affair where participants only recently escaped being pelted with stones, spit and insults, while in London is a commercialised, hyper-organised, carnivalesque affair which has become so "mainstream" that there is a backlash amongst some in the community who prefer to attend a tongue in cheek alternative event called *Gay Shame*. Clearly the margins/mainstream debate is also more complex than this, but being in San Francisco I again questioned myself. Where do I stand on this and how

is it affected by where I am geographically standing? With regard to my particular research, it seems to be that queer women are marginalised in contemporary dance, which is already a niche art form. Do I embrace this outsider status? Do I try to subvert the norms from within or without?

### **Communities, histories and curating**

I spent a lot of time visiting exhibitions, museums and attending discussions, having the pleasure to see work and meet people from Queer Cultural Center, The Yerba Buena Center for the Arts, Center for Sex and Culture, Root Division, SOMArts, National Queer Arts Festival, CounterPULSE, Dancers' Group, SALTA, Periwinkle Film Festival, Freespace, LGBT History Museum as well as several independent curators, artists and event makers. I was struck by the remarkable warmth of welcome I was shown and the ease with which I felt I could access information and get involved with the queer and arts communities in the city. This seemed in sharp contrast to the clique culture and cynicism one can sometimes come up against in Europe. Perhaps it was just that I was a foreigner and therefore slightly exotic (if one can say that about a Brit), but I did have the very real sense that community was an idea taken very seriously. It is something to be cultivated for the sake of empowering and mobilising individuals, for creating change and opportunity, for solidarity and strength and underpinned by the belief that through shared endeavour great things can be achieved. I was also extremely moved by these sentiments when learning more about LGBTQ history and the determination, ingenuity and bravery of those who struggled for and continue to struggle for civil rights. I started to think about how communities are built and maintained, how can I engage my communities (local, artistic, queer...), what and how can I contribute to them? I also began to think about curatorial practices too, thinking about how one can create or re-frame contexts of production and presentation to encourage artistic fruitfulness or to create social change.

### **Taking it lightly, letting it be**

On a different tack, I also spent some time exploring the San Francisco and Bay Area Contact Improvisation scene. I wanted to brush up my slightly rusty skills and upon attending jams in Berkeley, quickly found myself amongst a fluid set of highly skilled and welcoming practitioners keen to learn and share their expertise. So I literally threw myself into it! Tumbling, swinging, sweating, chuckling, careening and caressing my way through space, I fell through a series of awkward, gentle, frenetic or fluent physical encounters. I realised how much I missed this dance form, mainly because many of the subjects I had been thinking about and probably over-thinking could drop away from my conscious mind and simply be present in the air, in the touches between people, in the vibrant melange of individuality all in one room. CI is a form that explicitly resists representation in movement and that privileges first person, subjective sensation over outward perception. Functionality, physical "listening" and intuition are prized over codified aesthetics. It is consciously democratic and inclusive. If ever there was a gender-encompassing dance practice, CI could be it. You can bring any brand of selfhood and feel invited. And this was a relief. Not only did I feel less self-conscious but I realised, at the moment of skidding across the floor or swooping about someone's neck, that somehow many of my

questions could be present with a greater lightness, that they were perhaps in less urgent need of cogitation than I thought. I was reminded of how much of CI is about consciously letting go of control and trusting in the falling and rising of bodies, thoughts and feelings. I resolved to invite myself to playfully apply this to my research.

### **The Crucible: Studio practice**

So then how to boil all this down in the studio, how to concentrate the mass of thoughts, questions and experiences to any kind of physical essence?! This was perhaps an overwhelming, impossible task that may only bear fruit in the months or even years to follow. I got lost, wondering if I was chasing phantoms in the fog, but I also made valuable progress unique to these circumstances.

Firstly I continued the investigations of The Hunting Lodge, working with Eva and a local artist, Utam Moses, to develop a working practice of collaborative to-ing and fro-ing of tasks. One dancer proposes something to do, after a try the others may pick up threads, add on or change direction and propose the next task. This way a pool of physical practices are visited, revisited, reinvented and refined beyond the scope of any one individual. We found intersections and divergences, we deepened and clarified our own interests. Eva brought her preoccupation with language, free association and tasks that overload or trick the body-mind into playful, anarchic state of “realness”. Utam shared Rasa Boxes, a structure fostering deep embodiment of emotional states and possible cross-connections between them. I was keen to road test some ideas about authenticity in game structures and to discover how present gender might be in expressions of aggression or tenderness. This has subsequently led to further development of an installation piece through residencies offered by The Place, Performing Gender and Nederlandse Dansdagen. I hope to bring it to fruition next year.

I also spent some studio time alone developing personal, idiosyncratic vocabularies and improvisational scores with a view to developing a solo already in progress, *Small Pleasures (For Her)*. Here I wrestled with a possibly universal conundrum, the strangely symbiotic relation of our inner and outer perception of ourselves. I am troubled and inspired by the disappointing, comic, humbling or surprising rupture we may experience between how we feel and how we appear from outside. In working physically I was searching for something I am often suspicious of, a certain sense of “authenticity” or rather of “momentary rightness” in my femaleness or my maleness, in my desire. I worked to resist the classic trope of finding an outer expression of an inner truth, since I believe in a Butlerian sense of identity as something we “do” and “re-do” rather than something we that we intrinsically “are” inside. But then trying to “do” my identity consciously, felt fake. I felt I had erred too far in this direction in a previous showing of the solo in progress at Yorkshire Dance, at my best moments making a claim for a type of female masculinity rarely seen, at my most unsophisticated making a masquerade of something I wasn’t sure I really was.

So I went to see a drag competition at the SOMArts alternative arts space, which in fact turned out to be one of the largest competitions of its kind in the world. It was

truly impressive and reminded me of something at the heart of much play and playing: that perhaps one is most “authentic” when being “fake”, that a truth is best revealed in the clothes of a lie. I love the slippage of surfaces and meanings, the usurping of traditional modes of power, the beguiling and serious silliness of it all. These aspects of drag have certainly inspired my work in the past too, but often in a way that looks at *representation* and more recently I wanted to really get at *embodiments* of gender and sexuality. It was looking at some film installations by artist Heather Cassils that this became clearer to me. In Cassils’ works such as *Tiresias* and *Cuts: A Traditional Sculpture* she reveals the very physical processes of becoming one’s gender or sexuality. In *Cuts* she uses time-lapse to chart the crafting of her physique, gaining 23 pounds of muscle in 23 weeks by following a body building regime, transforming herself dramatically into a truly androgynous being. Here not only does she confound conventional gender norms in a way that seems so sorely missing to me in the dance world, she also points to the way that societal forces literally shape our bodyminds, our feeling of selfhood in the most visceral sense. I was reminded of a quote from Judith Butler:

“I wanted to work out how a norm actually materialises a body, how we might understand the materiality of the body to be not only invested with a norm, but in some sense animated by a norm, or contoured by a norm.”<sup>1</sup>

I realised that as I dancer with a fairly conventional training my body has been just as contoured by external forces as Cassils suggests, I just hadn’t really thought of it that way. Where she subverts the norms, I realised I had incorporated them. The dance techniques I have embodied re-enforce the norms of aesthetic taste, good practice and (of course) acceptable gender and sexual identities. These norms create my body; they create my movement. These norms chart the routes of co-ordination through my nerves, shape my fascia, they move me. I love them, but they are perhaps intrinsically conservative, even feminising, desexualising. I began to suspect that the very training that defines me, also prohibits me from finding a way to physicalise fundamental aspects of my identity. Can I ever escape this and move differently? Can I expose these forces through my body, the very means by which they exist? I don’t know but I am excited to try.

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<sup>1</sup> Michalik, R. “The Desire for Philosophy. Interview with Judith Butler.” in: *Lola Press*, May 2001