

SUSAN LEIGH FOSTER

Susan Leigh Foster, choreographer and scholar, began presenting concerts of her own work in 1977, creating several solo concerts: *Repetition and Difference*, *Correspondances*, *Lac des Signes*, *Polylogue*, *Spitting Image*, and *Tabula Rasa*, which she toured throughout the United States. She also created several evening-length works for a group of dancers, including *The Smell of Face*, *Blurred Genres*, *Gestuary*, and *Corpus Delecti*, for which she received support from the National Endowment for the Arts and the Rockefeller and Jerome Foundations.

Turning more to scholarship following the publication of her first book, *Reading Dancing: Bodies and subjects in contemporary American dance*, Foster also developed a practice of dancing her lectures. Three of these can be found at the Pew Center for Arts and Heritage website danceworkbook.pcah.us/susan-foster/index.html

Reflection

Looking back on my time at the Center from here, Los Angeles, now, one year into the Covid pandemic, it is both astonishing and deeply moving to remember what Interweaving Cultures of Performance felt like. The cordiality and respect, the commitment to measured yet intensely probing debate, the delight and humour that danced around the edges of our interactions – all that feels quite far away.

I spent four consecutive springs at the Center, perpetually astonished by Berlin's commitment to the arts and to scholarship. Every time I landed it was like walking into the world of my dreams. (My dreams also include self-critique and lots of guilt.) The Center brought together both artistic and scholarly research, facilitating a profound engagement with each.

I came there to write a book whose subject matter shifted significantly because of my conversations with colleagues who spun ideas in directions I had never imagined. Reworked and reshaped, I finished the last draft in my last few months at the Center. I came to learn about dance, and there was so much to learn! ('What the hell is the "free scene"?' I was eventually able to ask, among many other naïve questions that were met with complex and ironic answers.)

I didn't come to make dances, and yet I was invited to do so by Rosalind Crisp, and our project was generously supported by the Center who provided space – once clearing out the entire seminar room for our rehearsal. Such a rich time, full of so many discoveries.



Guts 'n' Brains

Building relationality in dancing

Remember when one pervasive stereotype of a dancer was summed up by the phrase ‘dumb dancer’? Maybe because they spent so many hours a day exercising their ‘bodies’, it was thought that dancers simply lacked ‘brains’, although they did seem to have feelings, and they could be quite emotional, especially when creating new dances. Equally, they were thought of as intuitive, as often going with their ‘gut instincts’ about things. This was all back in the heyday of modern dance, although the stereotypes continued to hold sway for much of the rest of the twentieth century.

This was also before the discovery of the human microbiome, the trillions of cells representing diverse species that live in our tissues and most especially in our guts. Now, it seems, scientists have uncovered powerful new connections between the gut and the brain, so many connections that brain scientists-in-training now start with a thorough review of the physiology of the intestines, since it seems to be the case that both diseases and healthy functioning that were formerly thought to be brain-related are now strongly connected to the non-human species that make up the microbiome. What could it mean now to have a ‘gut feeling’? (By the way, these other species form 80 per cent of the total number of cells our bodies comprise.)

I’m not as interested in answering that question as I am in probing the changes in scientific enquiry that led to the discovery of the brain–gut connection. As Donna Haraway (2016) observes, scientific investigation has typically focused on a single species and its habits rather than attending to the relationships among species and the ways that mutual support and interaction occur. As a result we are only now learning how multiple species of trees support and nourish one another, and how the brain, long considered to be the command central for intelligence, is only part of a larger biological system that includes all the critters (Haraway’s term) living in our gut. Haraway further argues that a crucial response to the political and ecological

crises in which we find ourselves could come from efforts in science to analyse human societies in their constitutive relations with non-human species, ecological systems, natural processes and even seemingly inanimate landscapes.

I could not agree more. And, of course, I ask myself, how could we do this in dance? One thing that stands out about the brain–gut connection is the set of cultural associations to each part of the body that previously cast them as diametrically opposed: the brain as representing mind, cognition, rationality, and the gut as body, instinct, and, basically, a food processor. Scientists might well have asked, how could these two disparate parts of the body have anything to do with each other? Hence, implicit in Haraway’s call for analysing relations instead of individuals includes the need to consider the potential for relations to exist among highly diverse entities. A second implicit dimension of Haraway’s approach is the proposition that these diverse entities through long association with each other may have built up trusted connections. They have learnt that they can rely on each other, even as they assert their different interests.

So again, I ask, how could this apply to dance? How might we cultivate what I will call ‘relationality’ in dance, seen as the exploration of potential connections among diverse beings. What kinds of practice might we embark on in order to convene a collective conversation in dance? (Not *about* dance but *in* and *through* dancing.) A conversation that could build trust *and* celebrate difference.

In offering one possible answer to this question, I will describe a project that I developed with Australian choreographer Rosalind Crisp during 2016 and 2017 that culminated in a series of six practice sessions, entitled *Two Gal(ah)s*, that we shared with the public as one set of events within Crisp’s programme ‘Un-domesticated Bodies’, sponsored by the Tanzfabrik, Berlin. At first glance, Ros and I share quite a lot: we’re both white, middle-aged women (although she’s nine years younger than

I am), coming from first-world countries and middle-class backgrounds. We both love dance, and it has consistently been a central focus in our lives. We have also known each other for a long time and count each other as friends. I've watched and admired her dances, and she's read and relished my books. So, we're certainly not as different seeming as guts and brains were back in the era when we were initially studying dance.

Our project began with the agreement that we would exchange, via email, short prompts every other week that suggested a way of exploring moving. We vowed to practice each prompt for five minutes daily, switching to the new one when it arrived. Here are some examples of the prompts:

September 1:

R: Find a gap and dwell in it.

S: Let something happen.

Let nothing happen.

September 15:

R: Locate the movement or sensation of the beginning of each breath somewhere inside your lower belly, dilate or delay the beginning of each in-breath, then take your fill.

S: Think only about where your feet, one after the other, are going next.

October 1:

R: Spread or scatter body parts on the out-breath, melt or gather body parts on the in-breath. Pay special attention to the moments of change.

S: Lean into it; break out of it.

The prompts themselves also reflect a high degree of similarity in our thinking about what and how we might use them to practise moving. With similar blendings of concreteness and abstraction and a similar openness to multiple possible movement interpretations, they suggest that we share common understandings of what dancing is.

This seeming similarity in our approaches, however, disappeared soon after we began to meet regularly in the studio and work together. Our differences manifested in the ways that we moved, the training we had received and ultimately what we thought a dance could or should be. I would summarize the differences this way, although Ros would likely disagree:

Ros looks at the moment before movement begins, and breaks that moment and its itinerant impulses down into myriad parts, finding that any impulse to move opens out into so many different possibilities that each could be explored and, in turn, examined as potential beginnings

for next moves. In this way a movement whose ending we can predict never occurs. I track the movement as it is occurring and try to interrupt it when it starts to go in a habitual direction.

Ros feels the movement from inside the body, utilizing a rich awareness of proprioceptive sensation to tap into how organs, skin, muscles, bones and sinews can activate. I look at movement as if from outside, imagining what a viewer is seeing (although obviously not successfully), and trying to direct all possible joints, including the eyes, into new pathways with different dynamic intensities.

Ros's training in ballet and traditional modern dance techniques was minimal and she has spent the last thirty years undoing the effects of that early training through various approaches to somatic understanding of the body. With a deep understanding of experiential anatomy, she accesses myriad crevices, corners and surfaces of bodily potentiality for movement. My body was deeply imprinted by ballet and modern, then kinesiology and yoga, and most recently Pilates. I experience the body as a compilation of all these trainings, in which they tug at the body for influence and often compete with one another for control over both the impulse to move and the movement itself.

Ros is dedicated to, in her words, 'marry[ing] the ever changing perceptions of the body with the willful courageous intent of the artist.'¹ I like to choreograph dances in the moment of performing them.

These differences emerged slowly during daily practices in which we continually set forth simple structures for what we would do together, for example, moving together from one side of the room to another, or moving together for ten minutes.

After each exploration, we would talk about what we had noticed and what we thought about it. And then we would propose the next structure. The talking slowly crept into the movement practices themselves as well, such that we regularly commented on what we were doing or seeing the other person do while we were dancing. We also recounted memories of past dances or dance classes, sometimes while referencing those stories in our movement and other times while doing something completely unrelated. Eventually, the combination of dancing and talking led us to agree on a single prompt that would govern each of our practice sessions: 'Two dancers reflect back on their history of involvement with dancing.' We agreed that we would endeavour to make an entirely new practice each time we met, and that we would invite the audience to view the practices as such.

¹ Programme from *Undomesticated Bodies: Two Gal(ah)s*, Ufer Studios, Berlin, 3–5 June 2017.

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In the meantime, the differences in our orientations became more and more pronounced, prompting several bitter disagreements, although we continued to agree to go on working together. These disagreements manifested in the dancing and the talking as well as in our post-practice assessments of what we had done. Never viciously, but sometimes quite pointedly, we poked fun at one another, dismissed what the other was doing or tried to outmanoeuvre or thwart the other's intention. In the comments that we received from viewers afterwards, this tension and on-the-edginess of civility in our process, walking the fine line between disregarding or abandoning one another and continuing to work together, seemed fascinating and unlike most performances people had seen.

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Stepping back from the account of this recent experiment, I want to consider what might be taken from it that could be helpful as a road map in building relationality. The skeleton of the process consisted of convening and then discussing what we wanted to do. Based on that discussion, we proposed some simple structures to explore, and then we held an evaluation session immediately afterwards to share responses and determine next steps. We repeated this process multiple times, which allowed us to continue to build our understanding of who the other person was while also forging shared language and values about what worked and what didn't, what belonged in the dance and what didn't. This set of procedures could apply to many different situations and involve many people or just a few.

However, underlying this set of procedures, it is necessary to agree on and make certain commitments: to collaborate on the project and to listen to one another; to give others space and respect; to not walk away from conflict; and to treat the process as a continuing set of experiments that does not have to produce a certain outcome or even a consensus. Ros and I couldn't have done that without knowing each other prior and also without coming from some deeply held, shared understanding of dance as a transformative process. That belief in dance is probably what kept us both committed to the project, even as it unravelled in front of us. Or were we just two very polite, middle-class women who thought it would be in poor taste to come to blows, verbally or physically?

This last question is crucial in terms of envisioning how this process could be adapted to groups of people with far more divergent opinions and views (about dance or anything else). Or is that a project worth pursuing? I'm desperate to figure out a way to articulate a workable model for building connections across/through/in spite of powerful differences, to model a potential line of response to our current precarity with its predictions of impending species destruction on a vast scale. Everything I read and hear is telling me we're running out of time. We can hit the streets, protest and resist. But we also need to imagine and build alliances among folks who do not necessarily share all goals but who do share trust. We need a model of embracing conflict but not violence, a way to cultivate non-alienated participation in a process, a way to be building a liveable world while the world as we have known it is self-destructing. We also need to believe that only through acknowledging and affirming multiple and diverse forms of political activism can we possibly choreograph our way through the catastrophic challenges that currently face us. Our guts and brains have to work together, or, rather, we have to realize that they already do.

REFERENCES

Haraway, Donna (2016) *Staying with the Trouble: Making kin in the Chthulucene*, Durham NC: Duke University Press.