
Society of Molecules: *futuring bodies*

May 1-7 2009, Melbourne, Australia

Our molecular composition in Melbourne comprised two Butoh workshops facilitated by dancers Tony Yap and Mike Hornblow; one with participants Pia Ednie-Brown and her Plastic Futures studio – PALS Plasticity and Autotrophic Life Society; the other with Adele Varcoe and her Fashion Design studio (both from RMIT).

Fascinated by the possibilities of '[futuring](#)': designing futures or alternative worlds – PALS explored a series of molecular-becomings and micro-perceptions, ways of embodying other animate forms through internal somatic imagery, towards speculative future selves...



Facebook

*Yun Bettergood is flowing in
between bodies in stealth*

*Yun Bettergood is feeling her
way through the mist*

twitter

*(Peter) is still sensing the walls
and meowing like a cat...*

butoh...



Our seed – sent to the Sydney molecule – was designed by Adele, in discussion with Pia. The seed consisted of a Butoh instruction package, which sparked strange synchronicities in their own musings around instruction art.



Meanwhile, other strange seedlings didn't arrive, and then eventually did, c/o Australia Post Quarantine, for 'Humboldt's Meal' in Berlin...

Sponge Horizon¹

Michael Hornblow

In butoh, it is not like a body exists as mass and moves in the already existing space. The self is a kind of transient membrane, and the space is perceived by passing through the body [...] the idea is that emptiness is standing. In other words, it is not mass but a hollow-body. 'Utsuro' (hollow), is related to words such as 'utsurou' (shift, transform), 'utsuru' (move, shift), 'utsusu' (remove, turn), and 'utsushimi' (actual body).

Atsushi Tanigawa

The *hollow-body* is a state of perception in which the body may be imagined as an intensive field in co-extension with its surroundings, what Bin Umino describes as 'a fusing of body and space'. A good example is an experiential exercise I call *sponge-body*, in which you embody the image of absorbing the surrounding space like a sponge, or rather as a sponge, you become a sponge through a process of continuous involution with your surroundings – removing, shifting, or *hollowing out* your habitual sense of the body's boundary condition, transforming it into a 'transient membrane'.

One imagines the *sponge-body* as an assemblage incorporating the sum total of all sensations – the pressure of your clothes, bare feet on the floor, the infinitesimal tilt and sway in standing still, the air on your skin, sounds near and far, all the sensations inside your body, colors behind your eyelids, the smell of various out-gassing materials, sense of proximity to objects etc. With this sensory data embodied in mind, you take a step – although of course in doing so, you have already short-circuited the Cartesian measure of a singular mass extending into a pre-determined space. Because you have absorbed everything as part of your assemblage, you are simply moving into yourself as a differential mode of intensive micro-perception. The space passes through you, through this image of a sponge, like the way Henri Bergson describes the image as a plastic mass, and matter an accretion of images, of every point perceiving every other as a dynamic multiplicity.

It's perhaps a little like how Robert Somol describes the Menger Sponge as an infinitely porous diagrammatic structure that "produces a solid looking lattice, the surface area of which approaches infinity as its volume approaches zero." Somol uses the Menger Sponge as an example of a continuously differentiated surface, performing a two-fold involution and envelopment of space. He sees it as a contemporary response to the limited combinatory potential of the Modernist 9-square diagram.²

¹ Excerpt from: 'The Body is a Wall: towards the bio-construction of topological bodies across Architecture and Performance', RMIT Graduate Research Conference, May 2009.

² Greg Lynn describes the 9-square as a 'self-regulating body', locating it as an important disciplinary device for the complication of architectural space and structure, moving

If the hollow interiority of the *butoh*-BwO is in any way diagrammatic it is perhaps more in the sense of Brian Massumi's *biogram*. Massumi sets out a series of complementary relationships between contemporary topological architecture and the abstract spatiality of embodied experience. Arguing the case from the perspective of orientation, the *biogram* appears as a 'strange horizon' within the overlapping of our exo-referential visual sense of the outside world, and our internal self-referential proprioception. This creates a vague interstitial space of indeterminacy – *a fold in experience* – through the cross-referencing of two sensory data systems that are already non-identical, but whose differences are elided within the intensive interval of the vague vector space we call embodied experience. The *biogram* appears as the aberration of a 'strange horizon' in instances where the two sides of this topological dimension become *unhinged*, for example when we get lost in a building and lose our orientation to the exit. It is this interval, this fold, this transient membrane or topological surface where the *sponge-body* may be located.

Another example is a focusing exercise we explored with Choreographer Tony Yap, Pia Ednie-Brown and architecture students from her *Plastic Futures* studio. In this exercise you move through five points of focus –

A. is the normal focus of inter-subjective relationships – B. is a point far off in the horizon, beyond the space at hand – C. is drawing this far-off sense into a middle distance back within the space, but remaining unfixed on objects or subjects, almost out-of-focus – D. is drawing this middle distance to the surface of the eyes, without going cross-eyed! – E. is taking this sense of the surface within the internal proprioception of the body, which is perhaps not so much a physical movement of the eyes as an abstract perception of somatic awareness.

Pia made the observation that this movement from far-off horizon to internal focus enacts quite clearly that 'strange horizon' of the fold in experience that Massumi claims for the *biogram*. This becomes even more apparent when this focus is taken into a circle of bodies, with each person taking turns to enter the circle and maintain the internal focus of point E while at the same time dancing with the openness you might associate with the spatial proximity of point A. This produces a sense of presence that engages with other perceiving bodies without collapsing into the everyday discourse of the gaze. Here the transient membrane operates perhaps like a camera lens registering depth of field at different focal lengths, dilating and contracting the space of perception by drawing the eyes of others into this intensive field – a collective fold in experience.

towards the open pliancy of a body-without-organs (BwO) – more a complication of surface and event.

Butoh-fu instructions for SoM package to Sydney molecule

I've adapted the following *butoh-fu* (butoh score) notation from two Butoh Masters – founder Tatsumi Hijikata, and Min Tanaka – also inspired by Bruce Nauman's wall performance studies. Please feel free to develop, export elements to other images and contexts etc. (Barefoot is best...)

HIJIKATA

The best method is to read this aloud, allowing someone else to experience directly, instructing them as they perform the actions. Leave lots of pauses to give time for them to absorb each element into their body.

The Body is a Wall

- o Preparation: With your eyes closed, press yourself against a wall and imagine, or rather image (like a scanner or camera), what the surface of the wall has remembered, its texture, humidity, temperature etc. When you have absorbed this into your body, pass into the wall – image what the wall contains, its various materials (as textures etc, not images as such, not representations of possible contents but virtual perceptions of its actual contents, whatever that may be).

When you have absorbed this into your body, image/imagine what is on the other side of the wall – as pure space (if scenarios come up that's OK but just let them come and go the way a space does when it becomes empty again).

When you have absorbed this into your body, pass along the wall and sense how it is interstitially connected to all the volumes and structures of the building. Sense how the building is alive, how it breathes, envelopes and enfolds things, how it contains memory as an intensive duration.

When you have a sense of the whole building, as an entirety, an entity – keeping your eyes closed – step away and turn around to face the room.

Re-construction (eyes closed): Your body is a wall made up of different materials and spaces, continuous with all the volumes and structures of the building. Take time to build up all the layers. Without opening your eyes, walk forward. Don't worry about crashing – your minder will be close by to stop you from hitting anything. Walk very slowly in a straight line, to reach the other wall on the other side. Don't imagine a point there to orient yourself. You are a wall, not a body. As you walk, imagine that you are not moving through space, not moving at all, but that space is moving through you. Hold the form of the wall and its continuity with the building, as the space passes through you. Allow the tentativeness of wanting to hold onto a stable point to become a flexible multitude of points, lines, surfaces and volumes unfolding through the wall. The limit point is internal not external.

Alternative (eyes open): standing still, absorb all the space and materials in the room by sending out your feeling, with all your senses. When you feel you have absorbed everything, like a sponge, start to walk. Because you have absorbed all of the room, you have become the room, and the room has become you, so when you move forward there is a continuous and imperceptible shift from standing to walking (short-circuiting affect, perception and action).

Web of Nerves

- With eyes open, stand at one end of a room, facing into the space. Imagine a thin nerve thread coming out of your forehead between your eyes, and passing through the air into the space until it connects to the opposite wall. Image its continuous passage a meter at a time and the sustained perception it carries at its tip, until it hits the wall, feeling it there. It becomes taut, just enough to pull your forehead forward at that point, but only a few millimeters. Keep it taut. Now imagine another thread attached to your chin, but passing through the back of your jaw and out through the back of your neck, passing through the air into the space until it connects to the wall behind you. Allow it to become taut and pull your chin inwards a few millimeters. A third nerve thread then comes out of your belly button, but then pulls you with it into a slow steady walk as it extends into the space (while the other 2 nerve threads remain taut). You are not heavy on the ground as you walk but float suspended from the nerve thread coming out of your stomach. As you walk other threads come out of your joints, multiplying until there are hundreds or even thousands emerging from the pores of your skin. You float suspended, feeling the whole room as part of you, through your web of nerves. Then the process is reversed, all the nerve threads retracting one by one, until you stand still with only the 2 nerves from your chin and forehead. Then they also retract leaving you as you started.

TANAKA

Explore the following images by yourself – not in order, not to represent them or demonstrate them to anybody, but by feeling their material qualities internally – texture, humidity, temperature, subject position etc. Try to get a sense of them as things.

Now in pairs read them out to each other, slowly adding more images until you have one for each part of the body. Then add more, with the old ones slowly dissolving away as the new images emerge, the two morphing through one another. Some reminding may be necessary if people forget an image here or there. The images may also be given to a group by one reader, or two readers to two movers etc.

The aim of the exercise is not to express the legibility of the image as a recognizable representation, or to articulate each one distinct from the others, but to maintain a state of continuous becoming as an intensive zone of heterogeneous indeterminacy.

Make up your own images!

Head:

Ants are crawling in one side of your mouth and out the other.
You can here traffic passing side-to-side on the highway behind you.
There is a mosquito in front of your face.
You are watching your brain (this is abstract so don't go cross-eyed!)
There is a flower growing out of your mouth.

Hands/Arms:

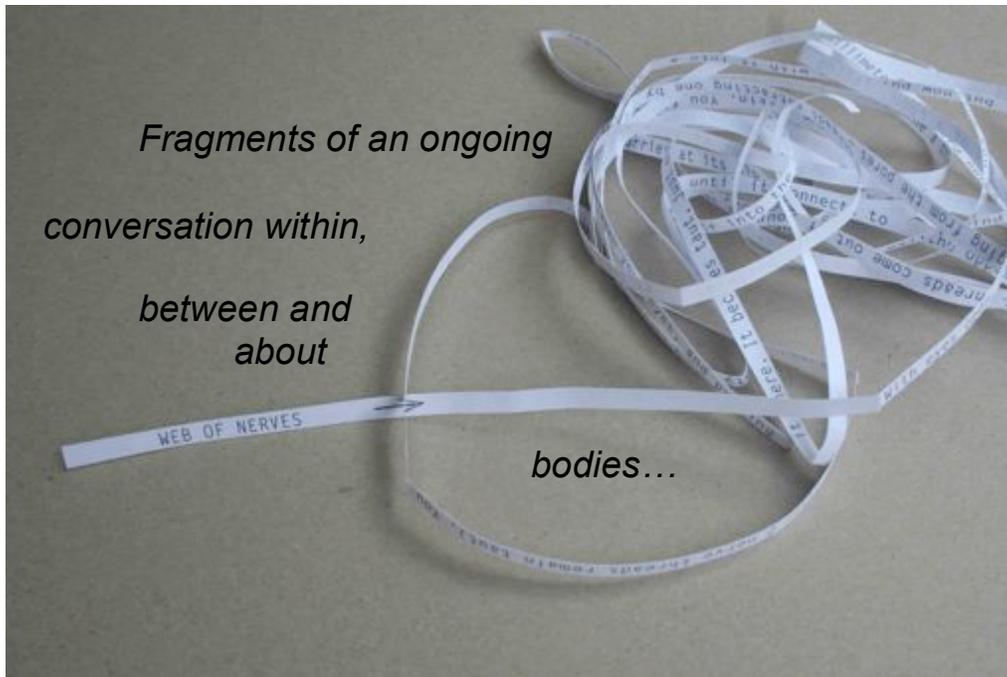
You are turning the pages of a 2000 year old book.
Your arms / hands are being manipulated by strings, like a puppet.
You are typing a letter (to your friend, mother etc).
One hand is copying the other, while one or even both do not belong to you.
Needles puncture your arms.

Torso/Hips:

A cockroach is running around and around your chest/stomach.
Your internal organs are on fire/or are being tied together.
Your spine is slowly calcifying and cracking.
An angler is pulling or tugging you by a fishhook in your buttock.
You are leaning into a strong wind.

Legs/Feet:

Your knees are laughing.
You have the legs of a chicken.
You are walking on a rickety log bridge across a stream.
You are walking barefoot on shards of glass.
Your thighs and calves are inflating like balloons.



Pia: Today the issue of horizons crossed my mind, and that amazing exercise where you look at an imagined horizon before coming back to the eye and folding inside. Can this be thought of as a way of tracing oneself (one's state of being) along the edges of experience, which topologically folds into itself?

Then: looking at the horizon: the future (i.e. 'what's on the horizon') and the way that being at the beach, at such an extraordinary spatial experience of threshold (between air/water, land/sea) is also one place where the horizon is so evident and fills ones awareness so much. Are there places/spaces that encourage a sense of this fold of experience?

Mike: Yes, nice observation... A-E focus relates perhaps to what Massumi talks about the fold of experience between exo-referential vision and self-referential proprioception. It reminds me of what Yukio Waguri said about the body being: 'A lump of flesh in a container, pulled out and back in, it undergoes multiplication and condensation' – that we occupy this double-faceted fold in experience. The A-E focus is really interesting when in a group circle, with dancers taking turns going into the circle to dance solo. The compounding of observation via different focal lengths (is the body a lens as much as a membrane?) draws out some interesting folds in affect/percept, affection/perception within and between bodies.

I'm also looking at his notion of the biogram re: the smudge / lag and swarm of micro-perceptions in the brain (via Benjamin Libet) – and how the 'dilated body' (like warps in the lens) that Jerzy Grotowski talks about, becomes an interval / duration both anexact and intense, and that this is where other vague morphologies between body, site and audience unfold / enfold.

Thinking also about the trope of butoh 'darkness as potential' when Masumi says: "What lies in the darkness at the end of the rainbows? – other people's minds." That's particularly apt for the focal work with solo dancers in the group circle.

Bernard Cache is a useful extension here, indeed we could think about the A-E focus as a series of inflexion points and lines of curvature (warps in the lens). I also like Michael Hensel's definition of curvature as a 'gradient threshold', which captures the performance ecology of butoh really well, particularly situating image-work from nature (butoh-fu) re: the biological paradigm in architecture (morpho-ecology etc).

Tony: At different stages of these focuses the body cannot remain the same – the shifts in the state of body is towards a 'softening', using less muscular dependence as the focus goes from A-E. E is likened to a body in coma, standing.

Quite impossible to think as if in a vacuum... I feel this is a common state experienced by butoh dancers and from this state the body can metamorphose to anything.

Becoming a Tree:

Start with a neutral position: unlocked knees, back straight, shoulders relaxed, string pulling spine to ceiling.

Focus 'B' *

Body turning into a tree (an Oak?) - Trunk strong; roots growing into the ground... as branches canopy spread. TRY to WALK with this feeling...a tree walking...

Seasons:

Spring: Earth moist, air ward, buds springing, leaves sprouting, sun warm, trunk transporting food, water...from leaves to roots, minerals from roots to leaves....

Summer: Getting hotter, leaves greener, deep green, insects in canopy, burrowing animals amongst roots, Ground dry, air hot, providing shade to animals, acorns...

Autumn: Cooler, Acorns dropping, leaves turning brown, windy, bark thickening in preparation for winter. Insects burrow into bark, squirrels into hollows, accumulating food.

Winter: Cold, Ground hardened, wind cold, leaves gone, snow, animals hibernating in borrows in roots, ...then to ground thawing for SPRING!

* See 'Sponge Horizon' for more on the A – E focus

Old Man / Woman:

Neutral position:

Feel the body as it is at the moment

Feel the bones, skeletal structure, muscles, nervous system, blood, veins, all the internal organs, the skin...

Growing old:

Bones shrink, arthritis in the joints, eyesight blurring, sounds muffled, pain in joints, weak neck, head heavy, jaw dropped and loose, no teeth, muscles loose and weak, shaking in little staccato movements, hunched over, hardly standing

Growing Young:

Reverse images

Can we imagine ourselves at 80, in what are body can/not do? What is the futurity of this enabling constraint called aging? What are possibilities for farming ourselves into morpho-ecologies with other species?